Dancing Feminisms and Intertextuality

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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SUMMARY

This thesis investigates representations of dancing women in three postmodern novels, arguing that their radical revisions of traditional texts offer readers steps to be taken in the future. Resistant and troublesome dances are deployed here to address feminisms, multiple and contradictory subjectivities and intertextuality. I suggest that a consideration of a nuanced view of multiple subjectivities can benefit women more than striving towards an illusory, autonomous identity. Intertextuality invites contemplation of the dance between different texts and the meanings invoked as a result. Not only are the texts' meanings unstable, but the novels themselves dance with other texts, taking them into account and departing from them by taking different steps; their instability of meaning and lack of absolute origins and authority allows them to become sites of resistance to dominant values. My research primarily draws on work by Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida.

   Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* is a postmodern text, which deals with the influence of nationhood on Irish women, and in which Irish subjectivity confronts irreconcilable alternatives. This chapter poses the Irish dance as a space where a new generation can come to terms with their past and reconfigure it. Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* rewrites the tale of 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' and in the process challenges patriarchal marriage and heterosexuality as norms. The text 'dances' between traditional and postmodern historical representations of seventeenth-century England, offering readers conflicting versions of history and time. In Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle,* the secret writing of gothic romances alerts readers to the influence of art on life. The novel takes into account, but steps beyond, those narratives that have encouraged readers to believe that they will have their feet cut off if they resist tradition. All three texts offer readers resistance to convention enlisting them in a metaphorical dance, where the steps are not known in advance.

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For my Parents

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Introduction

Dancing Women

When Shakespeare's Macbeth asks the three witches about the apparitions they have

presented him with, they do not elucidate but set out to 'delight'. The first witch tells

her sisters, 'I'll charm the air to give a sound, while you perform your antic round'

(IV.I, 128). Rather than answer Macbeth, they dance and simply vanish. These

supernatural figures upset the conventional order, disrupting rational assumptions

regarding morality, nature and gender. Their dance is deviant; it is a refusal of

obedience, which allows them to powerfully resist Macbeth's demands. Such figures are

significant in feminist thought because they 'dance in the moonlight' while the rest of us

have been told to 'walk a straight line, in lock step, in goose step' (Gauthier 1981, 199).

The notion that women can dance and therefore need not walk in the straight line

demanded by phallocentrism is central to my argument.[1] Dance *is* movement: the

dancing body shifts and stirs, constantly changing its position; similarly, women's

dances are featured in multiple ways in countless texts. My thesis investigates

representations of dancing women in three novels, arguing that their radical revisions of

traditional texts offer the reader steps to be taken in the future. Resistant and

troublesome dances are deployed here to address feminisms, multiple and contradictory

subjectivities and intertextuality.

Dancing can have antithetical meanings. One of the best known dances in

Western culture occurs in the biblical tale of Salome, who danced for Herod, peeling off

seven veils until she was almost naked. It thrilled him and destroyed John the Baptist.

This dance seduces the male viewer, arguably objectifying the dancer, but still

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[1] Xavière Gauthier sees witches as rapturous, dancing, babbling creatures who pose a danger to patriarchal society, which excludes and represses 'female strength' (1981, 203). Although Gauthier romanticizes 'woman' and her closeness to nature, her comments here serve to illustrate one of the starting points of my study.

guarantees her authority and the fulfillment of her wishes. Her perilous dance endangers

the status quo; although it may not be an ideal model because it is bound up in the

objectification of the female body by a male viewer, it nevertheless entails disruption,

resistance and power.[2] Less equivocally, the book of Exodus tells of Miriam, sister of

Moses, who led women in a dance to celebrate their deliverance from the Egyptians:

'then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all

the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances' (Exodus 15:20).[3] Miriam

is one of few powerful females in the Bible, and significantly chooses to dance in

leading the women's celebration of their state of liberation.

Dancing can mean either freedom or powerlessness. It generally signifies

weakness when the pace is set by men. Eva Figes invokes it to describe women's

'largely man-made' status: 'woman, presented with an image in a mirror, has danced to

that image in a hypnotic trance. And because she thought the image was herself, it

became just that' (1970, 15). Here, dancing signifies entrapment and powerlessness, an

idea which, contrary to the popular vision of dance as pleasurable, is pervasive in

traditional, realist texts. Dancing women are often trapped within a confining cultural

script in service of the male gaze and have frequently been presented as pandering to the

desires of men, as dancing a graceful, 'feminine' role, in which they are actually

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[2] It might be argued that Salome's dance exercises a more powerful hold over Herod than the display of her naked body does, as well as providing her with a defensive tool. In 'Striptease', Roland Barthes argues that the dance is a mystifying device which regulates the act of becoming bare 'to the rank of parasitical operations'. In acts of striptease, 'the dance, consisting of ritual gestures' is 'in no way an erotic element' but rather allows dancers to exorcise the 'fear of immobility' which accompanies nakedness and to take 'refuge in the sureness of their technique' (2000, 84-86).

[3] Miriam's position of power is later taken away in Numbers 12 when God punishes her with leprosy for revolting against Moses and claiming to be his equal as a prophet. She is, however, cured seven days later. Punishment for dancing, for literally and metaphorically taking a step that goes beyond what is socially and culturally acceptable, is evident elsewhere in the Bible. In the book of Judges, Jephthah, having offered the first thing that was to come out of the door of his house as a sacrifice to God, must sacrifice his daughter: 'When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing' (Judges 11:34). Jephthah's daughter dances to celebrate her father's return and ends up being burned. A similar example of castigated dancing women occurs in Euripedes's *Bacchae*, where wild Dionysian dance provides women with temporary relief from their domestic responsibilities in a restrictive, male dominated society. Their bare-foot dancing is both jubilant and destructive, providing a space in which they live out alternative roles, but they eventually face punishment and censure for rebelling and the social order is finally restored.

immobilised.[4] In nineteenth-century texts, such as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*, dance can provide women with an opportunity for exhilarating physical movement. However, these women's marital prospects depend partially upon invitations to dance from eligible bachelors at social gatherings, where the ability to dance well confers social advantage; those women who cannot (or are not invited to) must 'sit out' the dance.[5] This motif remains prevalent today, especially in the popular image of ballerinas, who are typically figured as graceful sylphs reliant on physical and financial support from men. Many fairy tales also portray dancing girls and women who are chastised for taking forbidden steps: in the Grimm brothers' 'The Dancing Shoes', princesses are punished for escaping their room to attend a magical underground ball where they dance with princes. Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Red Shoes' tell of girls who are penalised for trying to step beyond the cultural script. Even Cinderella risks being turned back into a scullion if she remains beyond the designated hour at the Prince's ball. Snow White's 'wicked' stepmother, too, is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she falls down dead.[6]

Dance, then, offers alternatives: it can signify discipline and subservience as women follow the steps of a male partner, or it can offer a place of freedom to break with and change rules. Whilst dance can imply obedience to the rules, it can also mean free expression, celebration of the power of the body, and release from constraints. In this thesis, I investigate three postmodern novels which feature women dancing *jubilantly* and who take the risk of having their feet metaphorically cut off.[7] In these texts, dance is not figured negatively, but represents a positive step for women. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*, Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and

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[4] For a discussion of how dance scholars have approached the male gaze see Helen Thomas (1996, 74-82).

[5] For examples, see *Northanger Abbey* (Austen 1995, 69), *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 1972, 72) and *Emma* (Austen 1966, 253).

[6] Fairy tales and their reinscriptions will be explored in more detail in my chapters on *Sexing the Cherry* and *Lady Oracle*.

[7] I refer here to Jean François Lyotard's call for the avant garde to jubilantly celebrate the ability to break and invent new rules in aesthetics and to question what has gone before (1992, 22).

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* not only reconfigure meanings associated with dance,

but are dancing texts themselves, which invite the reader to eschew stable meaning and

fixed readings. I argue that dancing provides room to resist the negative meanings often

associated with women; rather than dance to a man-made image in a 'hypnotic trance',

these texts suggest that women can oppose and rewrite culture's choreography. I locate

moments in which the space of the dance provides women with a place from which to

defy cultural convention. It allows temporary relief from dictated roles and the

realization that a stable, homogeneous identity is illusory, while multifarious,

contradictory subjectivities offer a brighter, more optimistic alternative.

It is important to emphasise here that I do not endeavour to write a study of

dance or choreography; rather, I deploy the motif of dance as a means of addressing

feminism and intertextuality. Criticism has been aimed from the field of dance studies at

academics from other disciplines who appropriate the dance as simply a borrowed

metaphor.[8] I write not as a dancer or dance scholar, but as a reader of texts, and believe

that, far from subsuming the importance of the dance, I highlight its interdisciplinary

relevance by examining it in conjunction with other fields. Metaphors, after all, can

allow for ideas traditionally seen as separate to be combined, and provide opportunities

'to imagine in the material of language what hasn't yet come [...] into social being'

(Miller 1991, xii). Dance is found in this thesis in many forms; moreover, there are

sections of the thesis which do not explicitly refer to dance, but constantly and

implicitly allude to the 'multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of

them original, blend and clash', that is, the result of the dance between different texts

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[8] Alexandra Carter notes that feminist studies has been guilty of losing sight of the specificity of dance, especially 'wherein all ballerinas are seen to represent the sylph or white-gauzed figure' (1998, 12); on the other hand, Carter welcomes the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries as a positive step for dance studies. Of particular help is poststructuralism, which looks 'not just to language but to other signs and signifiers as carriers of meaning. Of these, attention to the body has created opportunity for the conception of dance as discourse' (1998, 10). She also notes that dance interweaves with other disciplines, sometimes leaving 'its disciplinary stage altogether, performing in new spaces' (1998, 13). Amy Koritz (1996) and Jane C. Desmond (1998) also discuss the positive interdisciplinary exchange that can exist between dance and cultural studies.

(Barthes 1977b, 146). I refer to both literal and metaphorical dancing and hold not only that dance provides women with a space for resistance, but also that feminism and texts may dance in order for future steps to be envisioned.

Dancing Inter/texts

The title of Derrida's essay 'Differance' suggests not only that which is different, but also that which is deferred. Meaning only emerges when what is absent has already been excluded and thus, paradoxically, invoked; there is no such thing, therefore as the essential stability of signs: 'The elements of signification function not by virtue of the compact force of their cores but by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another' (Derrida, 1973, 139). The three novels dealt with here invite the reader to consider certain ideas by both explicitly and implicitly referring to other texts, that is, by nature of a 'network of oppositions'. They dance not only in the sense that they offer readers spaces to rewrite the cultural script, but also because of their relationships with intertexts, each text being 'necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences' (Derrida 1973, 140). Not only are the texts' meanings unstable, but the novels themselves dance with other texts, taking them into account and departing from them by taking different steps; their instability of meaning and lack of absolute origins and authority allow them to become sites of resistance to dominant values.

The signifier dances—it cannot be held down to one meaning—its meaning cannot be made present, because 'within a language, within the system of language, there are only differences' (Derrida 1973, 140). Like the dance, each element of signification and each text 'is related to something other than itself but retains the mark

of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element' (Derrida 1973, 142). Dance takes place but can never be made stable; it leaves traces of footsteps behind, just as the signifier means only in relation to other signifiers, that is, it retains the trace of what it is not. I will argue that the novels I investigate do not reinforce the status quo, but rather highlight, challenge and subvert the concepts inscribed in other texts which are unhelpful to the construction of positive subjectivities for women. Texts, like dancing, may be patterned to some degree but not necessarily completely so; both can be revised to give 'the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, [and] [...] daring to break with normal [...] expectations' (Mulvey 1992, 24). Intertextuality invites contemplation of the dance between different texts and the meanings invoked as a result.

I draw on theories of intertextuality to comment on the impossibility of originality, Authority, stability and identity, particularly Julia Kristeva's 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel'[9] and 'The Bounded Text' and Roland Barthes's *Pleasure of the Text*, *S/Z*, and 'The Death of the Author'. Kristeva's and Barthes's texts are particularly pertinent to my thesis, as they insist that meaning is not produced by the individual, but that the individual is in fact an effect produced in a communal framework.[10] My study

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[9] Kristeva coined the term 'intertextuality' in this text. For a history of intertextuality from Plato to Kristeva, see Worton and Still, who note that although the term intertextuality dates from the 1960s it is 'as old as recorded human society' (1990, 2).

[10] Theories of intertexuality abound, such as those of Riffaterre, Bakhtin, Bloom and Genette. I do not concentrate on Riffaterre's theories of intertextuality as he writes of 'correct' interpretations of texts as well as authorial intention (1977, 206). He is concerned with *decoding* texts and what texts 'force' readers to do, noting that intertextuality 'refers to an operation of the reader's mind, but it is an obligatory one, necessary to any textual decoding' (1984, 142). His retention of these inevitably logocentric terms is at odds with my approach, which suggests that texts cannot be decoded as they are multiple and have no stable, underlying code. Texts cannot *force* readers to do anything; they offer themselves to be read in certain ways but do not have to be read in that way. For a lucid analysis of Riffaterre's reliance on notions of decoding, correct interpretations and readers as passive receptacles rather than subjects of interpretation, see Anne Freadman (1983). See Paul de Man (1981) for a balanced critical analysis of Riffaterre as a formalist, and Marc Eli Blanchard for an analysis of Riffaterre's approach to the reader as a decoder who is confronted with 'a multiplicity of semantic choices' which are nevertheless limited (1981, 16). Bakhtin is included to a certain extent in this thesis as his writings provide a starting point for Kristeva's theories of the text, and his use of the carnivalesque is employed in chapter two. Bloom's

analyses both the rewriting of intertexts, which are mentioned and cited in obvious ways, as well as the less apparent traces of texts which thread through the narratives.

Dancing Feminisms

As my objective is to demonstrate that 'stepping beyond' is a necessary and positive gesture for feminist politics and textuality, my critical approach entails departing slightly from different types of feminism, while appreciating their relevance in other contexts. My feminist attitude is informed partly by 'Choreographies', a 1982 interview with Jacques Derrida by Christie McDonald, which provides an insightful comparison of feminism and dance. The interview discusses how to deal with inherited feminisms and employs dancing as a way to challenge the notion of 'woman's place', beginning with a quotation from Emma Goldman, a feminist, anarchist, and writer of the late nineteenth century, whose sentiments are echoed in the texts I analyse. Goldman, a devoted dancer, once refused to march militantly, declaring 'if I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution' (Derrida 1988, 163). Taking a step on the basis of this notion, I propose that feminism might dance rather than march.

By 'marching', I refer not only to an antagonistic and combative form of politics, but also to the notion of stringently following a set of defined rules within some notion of a stable, unified, standardized feminism which marches, metaphorically, to a set of rigid ideals. The suffrage movement and 'second-wave' feminism raised consciousness about women's position in culture in ground-breaking ways;[11] different contexts, however, require distinct approaches; there is no single solution for all times

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approach to texts is at odds with mine as it privileges Authors rather than texts; for a lucid analysis of Bloom as a traditional reader of sources and influences see Jonathan Culler (1981, 108-114).

[11] Even the notion of defining feminism in terms of 'waves' tends to confine it and gives the impression that it is an easily structured and recent phenomenon. Feminist works by Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century, and those by Esther Sowernam and Bathsua Makin in the seventeenth, show this not to be the case.

and places.[12] Marching, and even militant politics are about altering public practice and

are useful in the sphere of changing law and policy. People's subjectivities and values in

the sphere of culture, however, also need to be changed.[13] Cultural politics, where

fiction features, is of importance in this thesis. Of course, cultural and social politics are

not entirely separate; one invades the other. There is a difference, rather than an

opposition, between them.

In order for feminist politics, and indeed any politics to keep working, it must

constantly question itself; this questioning impulse is a sign of deference to an inherited

political program.[14] My respect for those women who took steps in the past to bring

women's issues to the fore therefore involves interrogating the relevance of their ideals

in the present. Feminism can be a pluralistic discipline, inventing and producing new

ways of seeing without having a defined starting point, thus evincing scepticism

towards inherited authority. *Feminisms*, then, can work jubilantly without rules 'in order

to establish the rules for what *will have been made*' (Lyotard 1992, 24).

Feminism is not a homogeneous or unified discourse; it may therefore be more

beneficial to talk in terms of *feminisms* instead. As many critics have pointed out,

gender is inseparable from other cultural concerns, such as race, class and nationality.[15]

'Woman' signifies an essential, universal subject, which is impractical to a form of

feminist politics that wishes to refute homogeneity and sexism grounded in nature.

'Women' is a more acceptable term, but as Judith Butler points out, it still

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[12] Simone de Beauvoir, for example, although wary of defining herself as a feminist in her early writings, nevertheless decided to 'march with the militants of the MLF'. She did so with the insistence that her actions were suited to the situation at the time and are not to be taken as a general rule (1981a, 142).

[13] Julia Kristeva, asked about the risk of creating an enclosed ideology within feminism, replies that feminism 'is better than nothing, but it's not exactly right either. [...] There can be no socio-political transformation without a transformation of subjects: in other words, in our relationship to social constraints, to pleasure, and more deeply, to language' (1981b, 141).

[14] This is elaborated on in my chapter on *The Dancers Dancing* in conjunction with Derrida's approach to inheriting politics set out in *Specters of Marx*.

[15] For example, Judith Butler asserts that even the term 'women' problematically hints at a common identity, when gender cannot be separated from historical, racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional contexts (1999, 6). Jane Flax also notes that 'the experience of gender relations for any person and the structure of gender as a social category are shaped by the interactions of gender relations and other social relations such as class and race. Gender relations thus have no fixed essence' (1987, 70).

problematically 'denotes a common identity' (1999, 6). Teresa de Lauretis, however,

explains that 'the relation between women as historical subjects and the notion of

woman as it is produced by hegemonic discourses is [...] [not] a relation of simple

implication. Like all other relations expressed in language, it is an arbitrary and

symbolic one, that is to say, culturally set up' (1984, 5-6).[16] In this thesis, I deploy the

term 'women' in line with both this and Julia Kristeva's insistence that 'we must use

"we are women" as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level,

however, a woman cannot "be"' (1981a, 137).

In 'Dancing Through the Minefield', Annette Kolodny argues that feminist

critics, instead of trying to formulate a systematic program, may 'literally dance through

the minefield' of traditionally male-dominated academia (1986, 163). In doing so, they

may acknowledge that their work is neither absolute nor definitive; adopting a pluralist

approach does not mean constant agreement, but the hope that 'different readings, even

of the same text, may be differently useful' (Kolodny 1986, 160).[17] Each feminist

technique, taken in isolation, cannot hope to address all aspects of women's existences,

but if feminisms dance, they have a greater chance of addressing all aspects of women's

lives in different contexts. My thesis, therefore, adopts a pluralistic approach whilst

dealing specifically with how three contemporary Western works of fiction address

contemporary Western subjects.[18] Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*, Jeanette

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[16] De Lauretis's approach to 'woman' and 'women' is in keeping with my outlook here: 'by "woman" I mean a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures (critical and scientific, literary or juridical discourses), which works as both their vanishing point and their specific condition of existence. [....] By *women*, on the other hand, I will mean the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations, but whose material existence is nonetheless certain' (1984, 5).

[17] Kolodny's essay, first published in *Feminist Studies* in 1980, received a number of replies in the journal two years later, primarily from Elly Bulkin and Rena Grasso Patterson, who accused Kolodny of glossing over the differences of race, class and sexual identification. Likewise, Jane Marcus argues against feminists wearing dancing shoes, asserting that 'we still need our heavy boots and mine detectors', and accuses Kolodny, ironically, of obscuring the differences between feminists (1982, 218).

[18] Susan Bordo points out that all feminist projects cannot attend to race, class, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc., as well as gender. She argues that we should be aware that some of these topics will always be ignored or marginalized no matter 'how attentive the scholar' (1990, 140). I agree with Bordo that selectivity is never innocent, and therefore clearly state that my project considers *Western* literature and women from the perspective of gender and textuality.

Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* not only present

dancing women; in addition, they are dancing, postmodern texts, which offer the

feminist reader spaces in which change can be envisioned.

Due to the realisation and acknowledgement that 'woman' is just one subject

position among many, there has been a proliferation of feminisms in the past two

decades, such as lesbian feminism, Third World feminism and Chicana feminism. This

upsurge of voices from a variety of positions is proof of how nuanced and developed the

field has become and demonstrates that 'feminists have to be pluralists: there is no pure

feminist or female space from which we can speak' (Moi, 1997, 105). If all feminists

adopted a specific methodology, the field would not be as strong as it is today.

According to Mary Jacobus, 'feminist literary criticism must speak to, and with, other

modes of feminist and literary study, other feminist and critical aims and perspectives'

(1986, xiii). In this light, it is necessary to acknowledge those feminisms which are

highly beneficial in certain contexts, but irrelevant to my argument in this thesis. Some

feminists view women as different from and therefore superior to men and valorize

women's writing and the 'feminine'.[19] Some French Feminism, for example, argues that

new discourses can be formulated by women which spring from libidinal impulses,

providing an alternative to phallocentric language.[20] I propose, conversely, that

patriarchal language and meanings cannot be escaped, but may be resisted and

reformulated. I analyse three novels to suggest that phallocentric discourse can be

challenged and changed.

In her polemical text, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Hélène Cixous calls for

women to 'write through their bodies' to allow the '"repressed" of their culture and their

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[19] For example, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1982) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) have done much to bring women's literature to the fore, but their studies of women writers may risk constructing a separate space for writing by women, thus retaining binary oppositions. Gynocritics valorize texts by women but may end up reducing cultural constructions to 'nature'.

[20] French feminism is varied and multiple; I focus on its principal theorists and methodologies only.

society to return' (1981, 256). Although Cixous does not ground femininity in anatomy, she nevertheless maintains binary oppositions between masculine/feminine, logical/irrational, and so on; she successfully revalues the negative side of this binary line, but in doing so, retains the binary opposition itself. *Écriture féminine*, then, may remain intricately bound up in the system it claims to undermine and risks 'constructing a universal model of femininity' (Belsey and Moore 1997, 11). Although Cixous eloquently argues that 'writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures', her ideal textual implementation of this and its implicit stepping-away-from rather than challenge-to patriarchal language is at odds with my approach here (1981, 249). To propose the forging of a somewhat mysterious, secretive, sentimentalized language, to which women predominantly have access, may result in subscription to and perpetuation of a binary sexual equation.

Luce Irigaray's 'womanspeak' similarly proposes a method to disturb phallocentrism; although her texts deploy female anatomy as metaphor, a privileging of the feminine and denigration of the masculine does not lead to real change and risks making 'of the female body too unproblematically pleasurable and totalized an entity' (Jones 1986, 368).[21] I agree that phallocentrism needs to be contested; however, in my view, this effort requires not the invention of a new language, but rather, as Kristeva suggests, a challenge within its own terms: a feminist practice can be 'at odds with what already exists [...] testing the limits of language and sociality—the law and its transgression, mastery and (sexual) pleasure—without reserving one for males and the

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[21] In a 1976 interview, Simone de Beauvoir expresses the possibility that *écriture féminine* may not be of benefit to all feminists: 'On one hand it's a good thing that a woman is no longer ashamed of her body [...]. But it would be an error to make of it a value and to think that the feminine body gives you a new vision of the world. It would be ridiculous and absurd, it would be like constructing a counter-penis. The women who share this belief fall again into the irrational, into mysticism, into a sense of the cosmic. They play into the hands of men who will be better able to oppress them, to remove them from knowledge and power' (1981b, 151).

other for females' (1981a, 137-38).[22] Simone de Beauvoir notes that 'the language and the logic currently used in our world are universally valid instruments even though they have been fashioned by men: the problem is to steal the tool' (1981c, 191).[23] It is the idea of stealing and changing the tool that pervades the texts I analyse, as 'there is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides' (Mulvey 1992, 23).

In contrast to some feminist approaches, I question oppositions themselves and dare to dream beyond the number two. My close reading of intertextual references and dancing figures in three novels sets out to demonstrate that patriarchal language and ideologies are unstable and can therefore be changed and subverted, not simply inverted. I concur with Toril Moi's insistence that to cast women as 'eternal victims of male ploys' is not the only feminist way; rather, by stressing our right 'to appropriate other people's ideas for our own political purposes, we may avoid a defeatist analysis of the situation of intellectually and culturally active women' (1997, 106). I set out to show that there is nothing 'natural' which makes women inferior or, indeed, superior, to men; meanings can be challenged and changed. In my chosen texts, the dance is a space where binary oppositions are confronted and contested and where new and interesting possibilities may be invented and formulated, even in a temporary and provisional light.

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[22] Although I concur with much of Kristeva's work, her tendency to glorify the maternal body at times is at odds with my approach: For example, she states that feminist 'negativity is not Nietzschean anger' because of 'the decisive role that women play in the reproduction of the species, and because of the privileged relationship between father and daughter' (1981a, 138). In a separate text, however, her glorification of the maternal combined with the 'semiotic' allows the symbolic order to be challenged (1980b, 237-270).

[23] Mary Jacobus lucidly argues that a refusal to engage in the symbolic risks representing the feminine as 'marginal madness or nonsense': 'When we speak (as feminist writers and theorists often do) of the need for a special language for women, what then do we mean? Not, surely, a refusal of language itself; nor a return to a specifically feminine linguistic domestic domain which in fact marks the place of women's oppression and confinement. Rather, a process that is played out within language, across boundaries' and so the very terms of language itself should be 'called into question—subverted from within' (1986, 29-30).

Dancing Subjectivity

This ability to dance around and change those meanings in circulation in culture can be illuminated by a consideration of the relationship of the subject to language. The subject is in process, just as the text is in a constant state of production and the dancing body is never fixed or static. My approach to subjectivity, therefore, entails a rejection of the notion of the 'individual' as a free, rational, unified subject, in favour of the fragmented and contradictory subjectivities constructed in language. I owe much to Jacques Lacan's and Louis Althusser's accounts of the construction of subjectivity; although the body of my thesis does not regularly refer to either theorist, it is here that I explain the background to my conception of dancing subjectivity.

For Althusser, subjectivity is constructed in and by ideology. In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', he explains that ideology exists in ideological apparatuses, which help to reproduce the relations of production (1971, 151).[24] Ideology 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' and 'exists in the behaviour of people acting according to their beliefs' (1971, 153). It sets itself up as coherent and smoothes over contradictions in the interest of sustaining the existing mode of production. It is Althusser's account of the effect of ideology on individuals that is of particular interest here. He points out that 'you and I are *always already* subjects', that is, we are born into an ideological framework. Ideology is all-pervasive and only exists in relation to subjects. Subjectivity, then, is constructed when individuals are subjected to ideology: '*the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects*' (1971, 160). Subjectivity is constructed when a concrete individual is addressed in language and therefore

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[24] These include religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade-union, communications and cultural ISAs. Althusser distinguishes these from Repressive State Apparatuses which include 'the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.' and function 'by violence' or force. Unlike public RSAs, ISAs are 'of the *private* domain' (1971, 136, 137).

constituted by the process of interpellation. However, individuals are not only *subject to* ideology, hailed and interpellated by it, but are also *subjects of* it. Althusser's subject is ambiguous; it is not only 'a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission' but is also, more optimistically, 'a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions' (Althusser 1971, 169). The most important aspect of Althusser's account here is that it offers the possibility of change; the subject is not fixed in any way and can choose between the ideologies available to it, where these conflict. Although we are not autonomous individuals in control of meaning, this version of subjectivity allows us to embrace the notion that contradictory and heterogeneous subjectivity can allow for change.

Jacques Lacan also explains the construction of subjectivity, but by placing emphasis on how the organism becomes a speaking subject. Lacan's re-reading of Freud in the light of Saussure proposes that we become subjects only in language, which grants us the opportunity to mean. Lacan's 'The Meaning of the Phallus' explains that the organism becomes a signifying subject by entering into the symbolic order, that is, linguistic discipline. The child's acquisition of language enables it to articulate its needs. This, however, promotes an alienation as the child becomes subject to a language which pre-exists it. Subjects do not have control over language; they must learn it and can use only what is available to them. Language is Other[25] to subjects; it is not within them or owned by them, and in consequence, a gap forms between the subject's needs and the Other.[26] The child identifies itself as 'I' in order to formulate its needs and

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[25] Lacan distinguishes between *Other* and *other*: 'Other' describes the otherness of language, the symbolic and culture, whereas 'other' refers to another subject.

[26] In *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure proposes that 'there are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language' that is, ideas are the effect of language, not its cause (1974, 112). Concepts are learned only when language is learned: 'The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units' (1974, 112); that is, concepts come about when a sound or graphic mark denotes them. Meaning is not referential or dependent on our ideas of things, as translation shows: 'If words stood

subsequently 'learns to recognize itself in a series of subject-positions ('he' or 'she', 'boy' or 'girl', and so on), which are the positions from which speech is intelligible to itself and others. [...] "Identity", subjectivity, is thus a matrix of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent, or even in contradiction with one another' (Belsey 2002, 57). Subjectivity, then, is constituted in language, in which alone the world is knowable. This account of subjectivity is relevant here because I argue that texts open up opportunities for the recognition of moving, changing, multiple subjectivities, which offer women the possibility of positive change.

The basis of subjectivity in language is of particular importance in a study of texts which offer the reader different steps to be taken. Derrida, referring to Saussure, notes that:

> 'language [which consists only of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject.' This implies that the subject (self-identical or even conscious of self-identity, self-conscious) is inscribed in the language, that he is a 'function' of the language. He becomes a *speaking* subject only by conforming his speech [...] to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences... (1973, 145-146)

If meaning is not at our disposal, as Derrida points out, but rather, is inscribed in language, how can cultural practices be modified? Language, in which meaning resides, permits us to communicate with others, so we must subscribe to those meanings available to us. However, as Althusser's account of the subject shows, we may be subject *to* culture, subject *to* language and bound to reproduce existing meanings, but we are also subjects *of* culture and language, invested with the capacity for change. Meanings reside in language and language exists in culture, a field which constantly shifts and reconstructs itself. The changing nature of culture bears witness to the fact

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for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true' (1974, 116). It is language, therefore, that offers the individual the possibility of meaning.

that 'knowledges inscribed in language collide and clash, producing alternative forms of understanding; resistances generate new developments; refutations efface old convictions' (Belsey 1994, 73). If language is relative and does not provide absolute truths, there is no 'natural' reason for circumstances to be a certain way and possibilities for difference are opened up. If we are not homogeneous individuals with stable identities, but subjects in process, an exciting possibility is created; we need not slavishly follow a pre-given routine, but can invent new moves, new steps of the dance.

Bodies Dancing Thoughts

In reconfiguring patriarchal language, the dancing body signifies just as language does; in fact, the two cannot be disentangled. The body in this thesis is not a specifically female one, but one that moves, dances and cannot be pinned down or essentialised. A thesis on feminism and dance must take account of Judith Butler's theories of performance, which have drawn much attention to the cultural construction of gender. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler highlights the fallibility of the heterosexual matrix by pointing out that gender does not naturally follow from sex and that sexuality, consequently does not stem from gender. This is helpful to feminisms that do not invest in essentialism and shows the potential to move beyond viewing the feminine as linked to anatomy.

Butler's theory of the performance of gender might initially be considered highly relevant to a discussion of dancing women; it becomes problematic, however, when her approach to the body is investigated. Arguing that the sexed body is discursively constituted, she does not go so far as to deny the body's existence, but implies that only our conception of it counts, investing in an idealist belief in the sole

importance of consciousness.[27] She concedes a physical materiality about which little is known and which is, in effect, inert. Her reading of Michel Foucault as an essentialist illuminates her position on the body: she notes that, according to Foucault, the body is the surface and scene of cultural inscription; it is pre-discursive, 'the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for "culture" to emerge' (Butler 1999, 166).[28] She writes that Foucault maintains 'a body prior to its cultural inscription' and that he apparently thus assumes 'a materiality prior to signification and form' (1999, 166). In *The History of Sexuality*, however, Foucault notes that the 'rallying point' for our counterattack on the allocation of sexual identities should be 'bodies and pleasures' (1979, 157).[29] This anti-idealist stance appears to be what Butler argues against, seeing Foucault as holding a belief that people were unconstrained by sexual identities at some time in the past.

Foucault may insist on bodies, but contrary to Butler's reading, his bodies are always in culture, always 'disciplined'. He insists on rejecting the idealist view by stating that the analysis of sexuality does not necessarily result in the eradication of anatomy: 'far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical [...] are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion' (1979, 152). Contrary to Butler's reading then, Foucault does not make the body a mute container for signifying practices, and like Foucault, I see mind and body issues as bound together 'in an increasingly complex fashion'. This has implications for the space of the dance, where culture, beliefs,

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[27] Butler is an idealist rather than a dualist. Dualism asserts that the mind/consciousness matters, but the body does not, even whilst conceding that the body might exercise determinations on the mind. Of course, since Descartes' cogito, medicine, the social sciences and so on, have shown that the mind and body are not separate. For a discussion of Butler as a Hegelian idealist, see Belsey (2005, 16).

[28] Butler quotes from Foucault's 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (Butler, 1999, 165), in which he states that 'the body is the inscribed surface of events' (Foucault 1977, 148).

[29] Foucault leads up to this point by stating: 'We must not place sex on the side of reality, and sexuality on that of confused ideas and illusions. [...] It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance' (1979, 157).

fantasies and consciousness have a substantial effect on what are experienced as

physiological events. While Butler, for example, may take that to imply that

culture/consciousness is central, I, like Foucault, prefer to acknowledge that our

conception of the body is not decisive, and therefore deconstruct the mind/body

opposition in order to find the trace of the other exerting determinations on the

selfsame.

Dancing constitutes a place of discovery rather than expressing an already

defined state of mind and can work in various ways; it can involve diligently obeying a

cultural choreography in a disciplined manner or, at another extreme, a feeling of

submitting 'mindlessly' to the rhythm of music, so that the body seems to act

independently. When steps are learned or taken and acted out 'without thinking',

dancing deconstructs the mind/body opposition. In the following chapters I argue that

ways of being, or subject positions, can be discovered in the process of dancing. Dance

is an activity where mind invades body, that is, where feet obey rules: at the same time,

body invades mind, since feet can take off from rules they were previously subjugated

by and consequently make new patterns. The 'steps' are both the discipline and the

activity; new steps can be invented, but neither solely by consciousness or by feet acting

literally all by themselves. I do not want to suggest that dance is some magical way to

achieve 'liberation' from cultural norms; it is patterned but those patterns can be

changed, because 'dance does not simply "reflect" the value systems, customs and

habits of a society but actively constructs them' (Carter 1998, 193). For this reason, my

argument is supported not by Judith Butler's theory of performance, but by viewing the

dance as a choreography which challenges 'the dichotomization of verbal and non

verbal cultural practices by asserting the thought-filledness of movement and the

theoretical potential of bodily action' (Foster 1998, 28).[30]

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[30] Susan Leigh Foster's sentiment is lucidly explained in 'Choreographies of Gender', which challenges
Butler's idealism and is elaborated upon primarily in my chapter on *Lady Oracle* (Foster, 1998).

According to Alexandra Carter, 'dance has suffered from an assumption, based on contentious notions about the nature of artistic expression, that it is the "outer" manifestation of "inner" experience' (1998, 19). This separation of mind and body in dance is rebutted in my thesis, and examples from the field of psychoanalysis will help to clarify my approach. The psychoanalytic unconscious refuses the Cartesian tenet that everything takes place at the level of consciousness and that we are rational, fully conscious human beings in control of meaning. Lacan's 'The Meaning of the Phallus' deconstructs the opposition between mind and body and represents my perspective on the dancing body. As previously explained, Lacan asserts that the organism becomes a subject when it is constructed in language. However, the price of becoming a signifying subject, that is, of being able to communicate in language, is loss. As an organism, distanced from an original state, the human being's 'nature is woven by effects in which we can find the structure of language, whose material [s/]he becomes' (Lacan, 1985, 78). The symbolic order prevents human beings from being pure organisms, but its advent does not do away with the body. Language allows the subject to formulate its needs, but there is a dissatisfaction at being distanced from a whole, pre-oedipal state, generating desires that cannot be formulated in language. This sense of loss is repressed, but returns in the form of the unconscious; the subject, then, is split, divided against itself. Psychoanalysis allows the body to exercise unconscious determinations, which are therefore not conceptions of the body.[31]

Many of Freud's case histories make this evident, in particular those of *Fräulein Anna O.* and *Fräulein Elisabeth von R.* In both instances, the young women's bodies

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[31] Belsey concurs that 'Lacan's rejection of mind-body dualism is not a cheery "wholism" [...] in which mind and body are reconciled or reintegrated; nor is it a relaxed version, where they subsist alongside each other in perfect harmony. And it is emphatically not a return to nature and biologism, relocating the human essence in the body. Instead, the relationship between an organism and the driven human being it becomes, at the mercy of compulsions that seem to have no origin or explanation in rational consciousness, is precisely the enigma that psychoanalysis addresses' (2005, 31). I might also add that though Lacan has been read as a misogynist by many feminists, his theories have also been appropriated by them for positive ends. Lacan's theories at least show that there is no 'natural' reason for women's oppression; it is bound up, rather, in patriarchal culture and therefore is not inexorable.

assume physical symptoms which are traced to unconscious desires. Breuer's patient, Anna O., nurses her sick father, acting out the 'feminine' role expected from her. At one stage, though, she wishes to dance, but her eagerness to step beyond society's expectations is guiltily repressed. Her unfulfilled wish results in the appearance of negative physical symptoms, including paralysis, which literally prevent her from dancing until she undergoes Breuer's talking cure. Similarly, Elisabeth von R., when examined for pains in her legs by Freud, displays the invasion of mind into body and vice versa. When her legs are pressed upon, 'her expression of face did not fit in with the pain which was ostensibly set up by the pinching of her muscles and skin; it was probably more in harmony with the subject-matter of the thoughts which lay concealed behind the pain' (Freud 2001, 137). Freud concluded that Elisabeth was '"fending off" [...] an incompatible idea': 'she loved her sister's husband' (2001, 157). Once the woman's unconscious desire was brought to light, her physical condition improved and two years later Freud witnessed her 'whirl past in a lively dance' at a social occasion (2001, 160).[32] The desire of these women to dance exemplifies their culturally forbidden desires, similar to those of some of the characters in the novels I investigate.

I do not intend to explain, therefore, when the dancing body influences the mind or when the mind may 'make' the body dance; rather, my thesis implies that the two are often indistinguishable. Rather than approach dance as a separate 'reflection' of the state of mind of the dancer, I prefer to deconstruct the opposition between mind and body in the dance. Dance is a signifier, a locus of expression that testifies to the unpresentable and takes place when words are not appropriate or not enough.[33] Dance

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[32] Although Elisabeth's dance can be read as a metaphor for acting out a kind of socially adjusted femininity following being 'cured' by Freud, in the above context it serves primarily as a positive example of the 'liberation' achieved following the deconstruction of a mind/body binary opposition.
[33] It is not my intention to place dance in a negative pole in a binary opposition where texts/writing occupy the opposite and valorized side; rather, I wish to show that the two invade each other as forms of signification.

perpetuates the mind/body mystery; the texts explored here do not set out to solve the problem of the organism/psyche; rather, they assume and explore it.

Feminism, Postmodernism

Closely related to my suggestion that dance offers a space in which new possibilities are envisioned, is my reading of my chosen texts as postmodern, that is, as texts which jubilantly step beyond what has gone before. I make a case that the three novels are postmodern, while arguing that postmodernity helps, rather than hinders, feminisms. I have chosen to base my approach on the polemic essay 'Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?' by Jean-François Lyotard, whose call to artists to continue to constantly challenge the 'rules' of cultural production in a jubilant way features in my discussion of both feminism and textuality.[34] The relationship between feminism and postmodernity is a nuanced and somewhat fluctuating one, especially where the topic of subjectivity is concerned. My proposal that the two can be mutually beneficial has been rejected by some feminists. As debate is necessary for feminism to continue changing and questioning itself, it is in this spirit that I will consider the reasons for feminist suspicion of postmodernism and offer a further contribution to the myriad voices already in contention.

One aspect of postmodern theory which encounters criticism from some feminists is its apparent disregard for discussions of gender and its 'masculine' language.[35] Patricia Waugh notes some similarities between feminism and

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[34] Lyotard, as one of the leading theorists of postmodernity is more relevant to my approach than others, for example, Charles Jencks (1996), who views postmodernism as an eclectic mixture of various traditions, or Frederic Jameson, who sees many cases of intertextuality as politically-lacking pastiche, where I read them as challenging the status quo (1991).

[35] Susan Bordo argues that postmodern theorists such as Lyotard and Foucault are in danger of disabling certain feminist critiques and risk excluding others, because their 'very language requires membership to understand, and [...] remains fundamentally closed to difference' (1990, 140). I would argue that this perceived difficulty may be because such theories demonstrate, in their very composition, that language is not transparent. I would argue that such language is not 'closed to difference', but conversely, embraces difference by refusing to simplify and present metanarratives and absolute Truths. Bordo subsequently wonders 'how the human knower is to negotiate this infinitely perspectival, destabilized world' presented

postmodernism but is bewildered that postmodern theory 'rarely talks about (or to, one

suspects) actual women or even about feminism as a political practice' (1992, 195).

Christine Di Stefano also notes that 'mainstream postmodernist theory (Derrida,

Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of

gender' (1990, 76). The 'silence' of women in postmodern thought, and the consequent

suspicion that it is a male province has also been commented on by male critics, most

notably Craig Owens and Andreas Huyssen. Owens suggests that 'postmodernism may

be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women', due to 'the absence of

discussions of sexual difference in writings about postmodernism, as well as the fact

that few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate' (1985, 61).[36]

Huyssen, more optimistically, states that 'the fact that to date only male critics have

addressed the problem of modernity/postmodernity, however, does not mean that it does

not concern women' (1984, 27). These accusations and concerns have been taken into

account by Meaghan Morris, who asserts that 'assuming a calculated deafness to

discussion about postmodernism is not much of a solution for feminist women. To

choose to *accept* a given constraint is not to challenge, overcome or transform anything'

(1988, 16). Following her discussion of male critics' claims that women have not

entered the debate, she provides a bibliography of works by women which address

feminism, reading and postmodernism. It is six pages long with 182 entries (1988, 17-

23).

In line with Morris' suggestion, I wish to engage with the postmodern debate,

developing and transforming it in light of feminism, textuality and dance. Principally, I

suggest that a consideration of a nuanced, postmodern view of multiple subjectivities

can benefit women more than striving towards an illusory, autonomous identity.

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in what she terms 'deconstructionist postmodernism'(1990, 142). I would suggest that this perpetuation of
the illusion of 'knowingness' is ultimately at odds with postmodernist philosophy.

[36] I am more of the opinion that what matters is 'not so much whether a particular theory was formulated
by a man or a woman, but whether its effects can be characterised as sexist or feminist in a given
situation' (Moi 1997, 105).

Implicit in some feminists' hostility towards postmodernity is its rejection of the notion

of autonomous identity as a consequence of its break from aspects of modernity such as

progress, reason and metanarratives. There is suspicion about the timing of the death of

the sovereign subject, since it occurred at the same time as civil and women's rights

movements and previously silenced groups demanded autonomy. Waugh sees

postmodernity's 'fragmentation of subjectivity' as a nostalgic impulse, incompatible

with feminism, which 'must posit some belief in the notion of effective human agency,

the necessity for historical continuity in formulating identity and a belief in historical

progress' (1992, 191, 195).[37] Christine Di Stefano equally bemoans the postmodern

fragmentation of autonomous subjectivity as expressing 'the claims and needs of a

constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an

Enlightenment for itself and that is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to

critical scrutiny' (1990, 75).[38]

Sabina Lovibond looks at the 'anti-Enlightenment polemic' of Lyotard,

MacIntyre and Rorty 'to consider their meaning from a feminist point of view' and

concludes that the 'pluralism' of postmodernism and its 'reaction against rationalist

ideals of positive liberty and of the fully integrated human subject' is not of assistance

to feminism (1993, 390, 405).[39] Rita Felski, who does not in fact see postmodern theory

and its fragmentation of the autonomous subject as a male-dominated arena, argues

nevertheless that current theories of postmodernity are inappropriate 'for engaging with

the specific positioning of women in late capitalist society' (1989, 70). Felski contends

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[37] Waugh argues further that 'feminism cannot sustain itself as an emancipatory movement unless it acknowledges its foundation in the discourses of modernity' (1992, 190). She states that '[feminism] cannot repudiate entirely the framework of Enlightened modernity without perhaps fatally undermining itself as an emancipatory politics' (1992, 195). I would argue that the Enlightenment tenet of liberation through progress is as illusory as a belief in autonomous individuality.

[38] Di Stefano warns that an affiliation between feminism and postmodernism risks having 'feminism without a subject and a standpoint of some sort' and sees the female subject as dissolving 'into a perplexing plurality of differences' (1990, 77). She goes on to list feminist theorists against postmodernism and concludes that a 'postmodern pluralism' would ignore gender issues (1990, 78).

[39] Nancy Hartsock similarly argues that postmodernism is unhelpful to feminism because 'despite its stated efforts to avoid the problems of European modernism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at best [it] manages to criticize these theories without putting anything in their place' (1990, 159).

that feminist poststructuralist theorists' critique of the autonomous individual means

that 'inadequate voluntarism is thus replaced by an equally one-sided and mechanistic

determinism; individuals remain unconscious of and unable to reflect upon the

discursive structures through which they are positioned as subjects (1989, 52-53).[40]

In contrast to these views, I find it more beneficial to embrace multiple

subjectivity and to reject metanarratives than to argue that because men apparently had

autonomous identities at one stage, women should too, thus merely reversing the terms

of the debate. Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson view the relationship of feminism

and postmodernism in a more nuanced way, proposing that the two share similarities.

They suggest that feminism can be pragmatic and grounded in the social but can also

benefit from postmodernity's aversion to generalizations.[41] Postmodernity, then, can

help feminists to avoid generalizing about all women's experiences. Of course, it is not

unreasonable for women, previously denied the very capability of self-emancipation, to

suggest that that reason, truth and progress should apply to them as well as to men.

However, 'feminist notions of the self, knowledge, and truth are too contradictory' to be

contained within Enlightenment categories and thus 'the way(s) to feminist future(s)

cannot lie in reviving or appropriating Enlightenment concepts of the person or

knowledge' (Flax 1987, 71). It is this approach that is pertinent to my reading of three

novels, which in both form and content invite the reader to consider that feminisms can

benefit from the discourses of postmodernity.

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[40] My previous consideration of the subject's linguistic relation to ideology and the Symbolic, and concomitant ability to resist and change discourses, might assuage Felski's fear of a 'mechanistic determinism'.

[41] Fraser and Nicholson argue, though, that postmodernists question universal truths because of 'a concern with the status of philosophy' whereas feminists do so because of the 'demands of political practice' (1990, 26). However, Lyotard clearly points out that the importance of postmodern aesthetics resides in its political implications, and by the same token, I would argue that the two cannot be separated (1992).

Reading Dancing Makes a Difference

It has been suggested by some feminist critics that women's situations cannot be

improved by texts because reading and writing are apparently separate from 'real'

women's concerns.[42] In contrast to this view, I set out from the assumption that

literature addresses readers' subjectivities and can indeed promote change. Textuality is

not separate from political practice or 'real' life; it neither purely mirrors life nor

constructs it, but does both, and can therefore benefit women by helping to change

practical situations.[43] Belsey and Moore argue that a feminist reader

> regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change. For
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> the feminist reader there is no innocent or neutral approach to literature: all
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> interpretation is political. Specific ways of reading inevitably militate for or
>
> against the process of change. [...] A feminist does not necessarily read in order
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> to praise or to blame, to judge or to censor. More commonly she sets out to
>
> assess how the text invites its readers, as members of a specific culture, to
>
> understand what it means to be a woman or a man, and so encourages them to
>
> reaffirm or to challenge existing cultural norms. (1997, 1)

My interest, then, is in setting out what three specific texts might invite readers to

consider, and in doing so, I hope to emphasise the potential of textuality to change

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[42] Jane Flax, for instance, argues that 'a problem with thinking about (or only in terms of) texts, signs, or signification is that they tend to take on a life of their own or become the world [...]. This lack of attention to concrete social relations (including the distribution of power) results, as in Lacan's work, in the obscuring of relations of domination' (1987, 78). Laura Kipnis also separates texts from political practice, asserting, astonishingly, that 'poststructural feminism [...] emphasises the materiality of the signifier; [...] and asserts that women have no position from which to speak' (1992, 206). Her summary of the situation is that for feminists 'it is either "out of the mainstream and into the revolution", or out of the revolution and into the text' (1992, 210). Kipnis's separation of the text and revolution is argued against in this thesis.

[43] Linda Hutcheon trivializes the effect that postmodern texts might have on social change, by arguing that feminists must go one step further than postmodern aesthetics' exposition of ideology if they wish to incite social change, because feminists 'are not content with exposition: art forms cannot change unless social practices do' (2002, 148). Apart from suggesting that social practices can change art but not vice versa, Hutcheon's view of postmodernism as operating purely in an 'expositional mode' is at odds with my approach here. I would argue that postmodern aesthetics' questioning and challenging of what has gone before cannot but be interpreted as inciting change. The alternative (which is what Hutcheon perhaps desires) is an aesthetic practice which would give a blueprint for the future, thus providing the reader/viewer with a comfortable position of knowingness, which would implicitly be at odds with postmodern strategies and unlikely to encourage change.

women's cultural positions. Rosalind Coward notes that 'there are no neutral

conventions in novelistic writing; all accounts of reality are versions of reality. [...] In

this respect, reading a novel can be a political activity, similar to activities which have

always been important to feminist politics in general' (1986, 227-228). The novels I

investigate, by means of their postmodern content and form, suggest that there are

traditional and accepted 'versions of reality', but also ones which are yet to be

discovered. Although I wish to highlight the political potential of literature, this is not to

suggest that it can single-handedly change social configurations; rather it represents one

part in a whole. It follows from Lacan's and Althusser's account of the construction of

subjectivity in language that literature can 'call into question the particular complex of

imaginary relations between individuals and the real conditions of their existence'

(Belsey, 2002, 62).[44]

Despite some feminist concerns about the apparent inability of textuality to

effect practical change, many others persuasively argue otherwise. Alice Jardine asserts

that the poststructuralist scepticism towards empiricism is not a problem for feminism

but an opportunity to be embraced: 'Faced with this demise of "conscious experience"

in the world, the feminist reader [...] will most certainly welcome the demise of Truth.

[...] She will also understand that it is not enough to oppose Man's Truth; the very

conceptual systems that have posited it must be undermined' (1993, 438). Jardine, in

reference to Derrida's writings on Plato, notes that 'the point may be not to rush out of

[Plato's] cavern with everyone else, but rather to stay, to render it strange, uncanny [...]

by questioning the writing on the walls of the cave itself' (1993, 439). The three novels

I investigate question the writing on the walls of the cave, instead of abandoning it in

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[44] Meaghan Morris similarly notes that 'the activity of transforming discursive material may not be 'sufficient to, or coextensive with, the tasks of feminist political struggle now or in the future'. However, 'such activity is part of that struggle and, more strongly, [...] can be one of the enabling conditions for realizing, securing and renewing its wider political projects' (1988, 5-6). Catharine Stimpson also asserts that women can 'systematically deploy language to stimulate their audience's desire for profound political and cultural change' (1988, 120).

favour of a 'safer', separate space. Bound up in my concern with textual subversion is not a reversal of power structures, but the notion of resistance and questioning power itself. According to Foucault, power is everywhere, and cannot exist without resistance. The existence of power relations 'depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance [...] present everywhere in the power network' (1979, 95). Resistances, by definition 'can only exist in the strategic field of power relations' (Foucault 1979, 96). The novels dealt with here employ modes of resistance to dominant textual and gender norms and invite readers to consider that power structures might be reconfigured. My focus is on textual strategies which modify discursive material and what these transformations offer to women

Virginia Woolf, in an essay entitled 'Women and Fiction', notes that 'when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values', and will 'attempt to alter the current scale of values' with a 'difference of view' (1958, 81). It is this 'difference of view' that concerns me; I set out to show that this difference matters and can benefit 'real' women. There is nothing naturally patriarchal about language, so it can be changed and resisted, and so too, implicitly, can the misogynist texts it has been deployed to compose. Woolf also asserts that 'the woman writer is no longer bitter. She is no longer angry. She is no longer pleading and protesting as she writes' (1958, 80). Regardless of the 'truth' of this statement or its confidence in writers' intentions, it describes the mood of the novels investigated here; they do not bemoan women's 'victim' status in patriarchal culture but challenge its very terms, allowing women to think in dancing terms and inviting the reader to celebrate 'a multiplicity, ambiguity and heterogeneity which is that of textuality itself' (Jacobus 1986, 30).

Feminists Reading

This thesis addresses intertextuality in conjunction with feminism and dance: it lets

these three topics dance together, though not in a strictly choreographed way. It is not,

therefore, a highly detailed investigation of the various and often formalist theories of

intertextuality. I do not trace source texts, but rather investigate the reconfiguration of

both implicitly and explicitly cited texts. I propose that the death of the Author, that is,

the demise of authorial intention as explanation of the text, represents a positive step for

feminism; texts have absolute origins no more than gender has its origins in anatomy.

We inhabit contradictory subject positions not only because of the range of meanings

available to us, but also because these meanings themselves are unstable and capable of

being changed, as they signify only by what they are not. If our subjectivity is

constituted by the language we learn (which cannot be tied to truth or presence), and by

nothing 'natural' and essential outside of culture, there is no absolute truth or authority

which dictates how we must live or how our culture must function. It is this notion that

there is no absolute origin or site of meaning that is crucial to my argument.

My approach has much in common with, but differs from, work by Meaghan

Morris, Mary Jacobus and Teresa de Lauretis. Morris's *The Pirate's Fiancée* is a

sophisticated account of feminist reworkings of traditional films. Her emphasis lies on

the power of differences between films and their potential benefits for feminisms.

Morris notes that 'the question of rewriting "discourses" emerges from a political

critique of the social positioning of women', so that

> the notion of a 'textual strategy' cannot become a sort of free-floating aesthetic
>
> ideal, interchangeable with any other general concept of action or a vague
>
> thematics of 'doing something'. On the contrary: 'strategy' here is a value that not

only refers to and derives from the political discourses of feminism, but remains

open to revision *by* them. (1988, 5)

Like Morris, I aim not to read texts as mere instances of 'strategic rewriting', but to go

further and argue why this rewriting matters. However, my project departs from Morris'

by investigating novels rather than films, and by paying closer attention to specific

intertextual strategies which can affect the feminist reader.

Teresa de Lauretis, in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* also

concentrates on close readings of films, but her belief in the power of texts to mobilize

political change is similar to my own:

> Strategies of writing *and* of reading are forms of cultural resistance. [...] [They]
>
> can] work to turn dominant discourses inside out (and show that it can be done),
>
> to undercut their enunciation and address, to unearth the archaeological
>
> stratifications on which they are built [....]. Paradoxically, the only way to
>
> position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it—to
>
> refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words),
>
> even to quote (but against the grain). (1984, 7)

De Lauretis prefers to think in terms of contradiction and resistance rather than

'freedom'. Despite her 'annoyance at having to use [...] the language of the masters',

she reminds herself that 'language and metaphors, especially, need not be thought of as

belonging to anyone' and that masters are made only when we 'accept their answers or

their metaphors' (1984, 3). For de Lauretis, as for the feminist writer and reader, 'the

point seems to be, [that] one must be willing "to begin an argument," and so formulate

questions that will redefine the context, displace the terms of the metaphors, and make

up new ones' (1984, 3). My argument is similar in so far as it shares her faith in the

power of texts to induce change for women, but in contrast to my study, she reads films

in light of semiotics and psychoanalysis.

Mary Jacobus's *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* takes a similar

view of women's writing, noting that in it,

> the production of meaning, becomes the site both of challenge and otherness;
>
> rather than (as in more traditional approaches) simply yielding the themes and
>
> representation of female oppression. [...] Though necessarily working within
>
> 'male' discourse, women's writing (in this scheme) would work ceaselessly to
>
> deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written. (1986, 30)

Jacobus's text has contributed greatly to my understanding of feminist reading but still

leaves room for a more sustained account of the intersection of reading, postmodernism

and dance. Despite the similarities of my approach to those of Jacobus, her work

focuses on re-reading texts in the light of psychoanalysis, whereas mine deals with texts

re-written within new texts. Finally, a text which differs from, but bears a title similar to

my project is *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality in Interpretation*. Janet Adshead-Lansdale's

introductory chapter to this collection of essays provides a useful account of how

intertextuality and dance can be juxtaposed, but the essays themselves are studies of

intertextuality in actual dance performances, focusing on choreography and dance

history. In contrast to this, my examination of dance focuses on textual, feminist

politics.

I have elected to analyse humorous and enjoyable texts. Nancy K. Miller asks

'why shouldn't feminists have fun?' and as a feminist reader I have found great pleasure

in reading my chosen texts. The novels are quite different but the motif of the dance is

shared by all three. I do not attempt to locate continuity between them; I am more

interested in how they dance than in endeavouring to pin down their similarities. The

novels, both independently and combined, act as examples of dancing, postmodern,

feminist texts. They are all set in distinct places and different times, but when closely

read, show the workings of dancing feminisms in relation to intertextuality. They

contain, as all texts do, intertextual references to other texts, but rewrite many of these from a feminist perspective, subverting narratives that keep binary oppositions in place, especially those that dictate what is associated with and expected from women.

As my thesis focuses on unstable texts, lack of established literary origins, and the death of the Author, I must explain why I have chosen texts written by women. I do not locate the possible effects of the texts on readers as in any way linked to the intention of the authors; I am more concerned to note the ideology in the texts than the fact they were written by women. Toril Moi notes that 'the fact that so many feminist critics have chosen to write about female authors [...] is a crucial political choice, but not a definition of feminist criticism' (1997, 107).[45] She makes the case that 'in a male-dominated context an interest in women writers must objectively be considered a support for the feminist project of making women visible' (1997, 114). I would not categorise my chosen novels as essentially feminist; indeed, I would not categorise any text as such, but 'given the right historical and social context, all texts can be recuperated by the ruling powers—or appropriated by the feminist opposition' (Moi, 1997, 116). It remains for the reader and critic to engage in a struggle over the meanings in texts, while simultaneously acknowledging that there is always more than one reading, and never a 'right' one.

My discussion of *The Dancers Dancing* by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, deals with feminism in Ireland and how nationhood has influenced the subjectivity of women since the early twentieth century.[46] Set in a Donegal *Gaeltacht*, this novel charts the experiences of a group of teenagers, whose transition to adulthood symbolises a shift from De Valera's conservative, religious society to an urban and secular Ireland. This

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[45] Moi also lists many feminist critics who have dealt with books written by men, for example, Kate Millet, Mary Ellman and Penny Boumelha, (1997, 107-108)

[46] I focus on representations of the nation and national identity in this chapter and not in others because this particular novel's intertexts are imbued with nationalist ideologies which have affected Irish women's subjectivities.

chapter investigates the effect of intertextuality on the construction of subjectivity, both in terms of its implications for the characters in the novel and its potential effect on the reader. Particular attention is paid to the novel as a postmodern challenge to its realist intertexts, both thematically and formally; and, consequently, how the death of the Author results in the birth of the reader. Far from positing a comfortable, coherent version of 'Irishness', *The Dancers Dancing* confronts the contradictory, multifarious nature of subjectivity and offers the space of the dance as one where a new generation can come to terms with the past, question and reconfigure it. Orla's Aunt Annie personifies and is literally crippled by ideologies of the Celtic Literary Revival and its myth of Mother Ireland. Orla's mother, Elizabeth, who grew up in England but speaks with a Dublin accent, lives by De Valera's 1937 Constitution, which names 'woman's place' as the home, but she simultaneously challenges this by turning her domestic space into a business. Orla, finally, as a teenager in 1972, emerges as a postmodern subject who is sceptical towards inherited authority. It is in her *céilí* dances that her heritage is acknowledged and rethought for the future. Irish subjectivity confronts distinct options in the narrative, inviting the reader to contemplate the potential results of these irreconcilable alternatives.

The reinscription of 'The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* subverts misogynist aspects of the Grimms' fairy tale, resisting and challenging patriarchal marriage and heterosexuality as norms. This chapter deconstructs the traditional opposition between oral and written genres and challenges the notion of originality. The novel dances, mixing writings without ever resting or relying on any of them. Despite these positive steps, I argue that a potential problem in the novel may lie in its reversal, rather than subversion, of power structures, especially in its representation of violence. However, its portrayal of Fortunata's dancing school is read as a positive step towards eschewing seventeenth-century liberal

humanism, in favour of multiple subjectivities. The text draws on popular images of seventeenth-century London, and invites readers to reconsider the objectivity of traditional histories, whilst offering them conflicting versions of the past.

In Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, the secret writing of gothic romances alerts the reader to the influence of art on life. This chapter highlights the dangers such texts pose to women's subjectivities by enlisting them in romantic ideologies. It analyses *Lady Oracle* as a text which humorously parodies gothic and romance texts, but implicitly pays homage to female authors by employing the gothic romance plot. This chapter focuses on self-conscious references to dancing texts such as 'The Red Shoes', 'Cinderella' and *Northanger Abbey*. The novel takes into account, but steps beyond, all those narratives that have encouraged female readers to believe that they will have their feet cut off if they dare to resist tradition. Focusing specifically on Joan's mothball dance and her final twirl on her balcony, my reading investigates the possibility of rewriting the cultural script.

I am concerned, then, with dancing texts that offer a space in which a reassessment and modification of our existing gender arrangements may become more possible. In the words of Teresa de Lauretis, 'time and time again the same concerns, issues, and themes will return throughout the [chapters], each time diffracted by a different textual prism, seen through a critical lens with variable focus. There are, needless to say, no final answers' (1984, 11).

Chapter One: The Dancers Dancing

The Dancers Dancing is a postmodern novel set in July 1972 in the *Gaeltacht*, an Irish-speaking area of Donegal. It charts the development and transition to adulthood of four teenage girls during their first time away from their parents. The girls, particularly Orla Crilly, try to find their place in an Ireland shifting from De Valera's conservative, nationalist, and religious society to one characterised by urbanisation, industrialisation and secularisation. This dancing text, which refuses to be pinned down by traditional narrative rules, invites readers, by means of intertextual references, to interrogate liberal humanism, classic realist fiction, and the problematic relationship of nation and gender in Ireland. This chapter will investigate the effect of intertextuality on the construction of subjectivity, in terms of both its implications for the characters in the novel and its potential effect on the reader. Far from positing a comfortable, coherent version of 'Irishness', *The Dancers Dancing* confronts the contradictory, multifarious nature of subjectivity, inviting the reader to contemplate the unsettling impact of the irreconcilable alternatives on offer. Focussing specifically on the presentation of women's subjectivities, this chapter will also consider the problems and possibilities involved in receiving a feminist inheritance in Ireland. I will argue that it is primarily in the space of the dance, or *céilí*, that these anxieties are temporarily suspended or resolved.

Mapping 'Reality'

The first chapter of *The Dancers Dancing* invites us to 'imagine [we] are in an airplane flying at twenty thousand feet', looking down on an undulating landscape, which spreads beneath,

like a chequered tablecloth thrown across a languid body. From this vantage

point, no curve is apparent. It is flat earth – pan flat, plan flat, platter flat to the

edges, its green and gold patches stained at intervals by lumps of mountain,

brownish purple clots of varicose vein in the smooth skin of land. Patterns of

fields, rough squares and rectangles, are hatched in with grey stone. (Ní

Dhuibhne 1999, 1)

Irish fields figured as a tablecloth domesticates the land; the chequered pattern conjures

images of country kitchens and familial, maternal comforts. The price of Ireland's

femininization, though, is questioned when women's bodies begin to be described as

both subdued and disorderly. No curve is apparent in the 'languid body' from such a

distance, gesturing towards the state and church's repression of Irish women's bodies,

figured in the characters of Aunt Annie and Elizabeth in this text. The mountains are

mere stains in the pan flat landscape, and are imagined here as 'brownish purple clots of

varicose vein', anticipating an aspect of Aunt Annie's body, crippled by the ideology of

the Celtic Revival. The well-documented feminist concept of the body as colonized

territory is doubly relevant in this map, suggesting both a feminised Ireland harmed by

the male colonizer, and women's bodies themselves as controlled by the Irish state and

Catholic Church.

The map we are presented with not only alerts the reader to the mapping of Irish

women's bodies, which will be elaborated upon at a later stage, but can also be read as a

metaphor for storytelling. Our omniscient, God-like viewpoint is soon eradicated when

we are thrown into the map itself and a mass of everyday details leads to confusion and

doubt. Clear, monocular perspective is thrown into disarray when the plane hurtles

down into the 'chthonic puddle and muddle of brain and heart and kitchen and sewer

and vein and sinew and ink and stamp' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 2). Although the figures on

the landscape are visible, eventually they will 'move out of the picture altogether, over

the edge, into the infinity of after the story' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 2). The picture begins

to spill out of its frame when 'the move from elegant abstraction into the specifics of the

culture' is enacted (Connolly 2003, 2). The text, in calling attention to the impossible

efforts of map-makers to 'show the woods and the trees, the whole world and all the

people in it', self-consciously rejects the omniscient narrator of realist fiction who

occupies a position like a map-maker, presenting to readers a story within a frame, and

providing a position of knowing comfort for them (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 2).

The Dancers Dancing warns from the outset that omniscience is impossible and

that truths should be questioned, because 'every picture tells a story. A truism. Half true

like all truisms. Half false. The rest of the story is in the mud. Clear as muddy old mud.'

(Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 3). Self-consciously alerting the reader to the partial and biased

nature of stories and warning that harmony and closure will be rebutted here, this

postmodern text questions perspective, mapping, and who does the mapping itself. Like

map-makers, writers of classic realist texts try to order the visible in an effort to

represent the external world as coherent and to provide a sense of unity to experience.

According to Lyotard, the task of realist aesthetics is to preserve consciousness from

doubt, to provide a comfortable, knowing position for its viewers or readers. It is a

matter of

> stabilising the referent, of ordering it from a point of view that would give it
>
> recognisable meaning, of repeating a syntax and lexicon that would allow
>
> addressees to decode images and sequences rapidly, and make it easy for them to
>
> become conscious both of their own identities and of the approval they thereby
>
> receive from others—since the structures in these images and sequences form a
>
> code of communication between them all. (Lyotard 1992, 15)

Realist fiction adheres to certain rules, inviting readers to approach it from a position

from which it is most intelligible. It is specifically disempowering as it offers readers

the illusion that they can possess truth, which it safeguards for them 'like a cupboard where meanings are shelved, stacked' (Barthes 1990, 200). By offering us a picture of the world that we seem to know, and reaffirming that this picture is true, realism appears to confirm our status as knowing subjects. However, realism 'can be defined only by its intention of avoiding the question of reality' (Lyotard 1992, 16) and 'consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real' (Barthes 1990, 55). The only way the real can be shown is by showing the referent itself; realism is merely governed by rules that create an effect of reality, not reality itself, and remains bound up in a fantasy that it is possible to possess the truth. *The Dancers Dancing* steps away from this notion of ordered experience and breaks the rules of what has gone before, placing readers in positions of uncertainty. The text's form and its portrayal of Orla's painful efforts to forge a consistent identity invites readers to see that the apparently stable position of knowledge that realist narratives promote is illusory. Rather than providing readers with a position from which the text is most easily intelligible, from which they can passively consume it, *The Dancers Dancing* invites them to participate in meaning-making as subjects in process.

Enid Blyton Sings the Blues: Realism and the Reading Subject

The Dancers Dancing sets up situations which might traditionally be expected to end in particular ways, but more often than not these assumptions are thwarted; in structural terms it parodies realist texts such as Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers*, Orla's preferred reading. Realist fiction provides readers with a position from which they know what is likely to happen, according to a pattern with which they are familiar. The realist writer conforms to a set of rules, which are 'methods of deception, seduction and reassurance' employed to provide readers with 'appropriate medicine for the depression and anxiety'

they may feel (Lyotard 1992, 15-16). *The Dancers Dancing*, though, plays with these rules and ultimately withholds final reassurance from readers. It calls attention to the conventional structure of texts such as Enid Blyton's adventure and mystery novels, which conform to stringent rules in order to provide readers with positions of knowing subjectivity. Classic realist texts progress from enigma through to disclosure, when 'the discourse completes the logical formula and [...] the game is ended, the drama has its dénouement [...] the discourse can do nothing more than fall silent' (Barthes 1990, 188). The pattern is so familiar that even at a point of confusion and enigma, the reader confidently knows that the end of the narrative will provide answers and closure.

As part of a postmodern strategy to differentiate itself from the texts it rewrites, *The Dancers Dancing* creates suspense that does not lead anywhere. The reader is invited to believe that Auntie Annie is dead, that Orla has closed the barn door on her dead body, and that she will reproach Orla for ignoring her on the road, but this never comes to fruition. The burn does not lead to an adventure, Pauline and Gerry do not drown during their midnight swim and neither does Orla's discovery of babies' bodies in the burn result in anything substantial. Killer Jack does not engage in a Lolita-like episode with Pauline; in fact the obvious reference to the book in his cottage parodies the clues and codes that tempt and mislead the reader in traditional adventure novels. The chapter titles are similar to those in Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers*, such as 'Off to boarding school', 'The spider affair', 'A bad time for Darrell' and 'A wonderful surprise' (Blyton 2000). *The Dancers Dancing* employs similar titles, but dances a step away from this leading and ordering strategy. The chapter titles are unpredictable: occasionally they divulge in advance what is going to happen, denying the reader any suspense at all. Titles like 'The woman of the house and the daughter of the house meet the young visitors' and 'Auntie Annie has a crowd in' blatantly explain what is to follow (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 22, 219). However, others are remarkably misleading, and

doubly so because previous straight-forward titles have lulled readers into a sense of security. 'A surprise for Orla', for example, invites readers to assume that Orla will receive the much-awaited letter from her mother, but we hear instead of the shocking disappointment she once experienced upon arriving home to find her bedroom usurped for use by paying lodgers (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 78). Other titles gesture towards an aspect of the chapter they precede, but not to what might traditionally be considered the most important part of them; for example, 'The field' in which Orla and Micheál sit arm in arm for the first time, or 'Chocolate orange' which the reader might expect to be called something like 'A night-time trip to the boathouse' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 226, 213).

The Dancers Dancing thwarts realism's therapeutic approach and questions the rules of its realist predecessors. By breaking the rules of what has gone before, though, the novel may risk being 'without a guaranteed audience' as it might 'lack credibility in the eyes of the devoted adherents of reality and identity' (Lyotard 1992, 16). The unsettling position offered by this re-examination of traditional rules may not be readily embraced by some readers. One reviewer of the novel, for example, initially enjoys the 'trip down memory lane' it seems to offer *Gaeltacht* veterans, but soon feels disappointed that 'nothing much really happens'; 'intermittently teased by a dead body and promises of lurid romance', the reviewer constantly hopes for excitement, only to find it impeded.[47] Noting that 'it almost seems as if everything has occurred already, and [the characters'] present and future is something preordained and inescapable', the reviewer's disappointment seems to stem from the text's denunciation of realism's structured procedure from enigma to closure (Mulrooney, 1999). However, the novel's

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[47] A second disappointed reviewer notes: 'Orla actively avoids visiting an elderly aunt until the very end of her stay, but when she finally meets her relative, her predictable surprise at the old woman's warmth and endearing eccentricity is tepidly rendered, dissipating the energy for what could have been a poignant, illuminating scene. The girls take every opportunity to swim in a local river, and tragedy is foreshadowed, but when it comes it involves people outside the Gaeltacht, has no impact on the main characters and is dismissed in a page' (Anon., 2000).

parody of realist texts such as adventure stories, I would argue, is precisely to invite

readers to consider that the present and future are not preordained or inescapable, but

can be constructed differently by readers who participate in meaning-making rather than

settling for an illusory position of comfort. The point is not to offer readers a well-worn,

easily navigable path, but to engage them in constructing different stories and futures.

The unsettled reader, no longer in a position of comfortable knowledge, has the

opportunity to question not only the rules of realist narratives but also the stable identity

it promotes. This reader might experience, then, the 'jubilation which come[s] from

inventing new rules of the game' in constructing meanings in a text which refuses the

consolation of correct forms and taste (Lyotard 1992, 22).

Adventure or mystery stories typically begin with enigma, and then tell of the

circumstances leading up to it in a chronological way, deceiving readers with 'red

herrings' in the process, but ultimately solving the mystery for them. *The Dancers*

Dancing employs this convention in chapter two; 'Washing' describes a scene which

takes place twelve chapters later, when the four girls wash their clothes in the burn.

These scenes not only parody the 'red herrings' of mystery texts, as readers struggle to

understand their significance, but also subvert realist texts' chronological lead-up to a

climax. Telling some of the story before the 'beginning', like this, also casts the notion

of 'origins' into doubt. The novel further subverts chronology by quoting from past

literature; indeed, it is not even clear where the story begins, as a poem by Gerard

Manley Hopkins precedes the first chapter. The text displays quintessentially

postmodern characteristics in its attitude to the past and the future. According to

Lyotard, the 'post-' of 'postmodern' signifies 'a procedure in "ana-": a procedure of

analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an "initial forgetting"',

that is, remembering, or un-forgetting (1993, 50). This procedure in 'ana-' describes a

futurity that does not negate the past. It is not a 'transavantgardist' type of futurity or a

nostalgic past, but a futurity that takes account of the past; it looks back in order to move forward. *The Dancers Dancing* blends past and present in its intertextual references in such a way as to question what lies in the future, providing a space for the reader to form new attitudes. The text does not *march* along in a chronological manner, but *dances* between past, present, and future, inviting the reader to think in non-sequential terms. The novel's formal and structural challenge to the tenets of realism enacts a simultaneous refusal to protect consciousness from doubt, and throws the illusory nature of liberal humanist subjectivity into relief.

One of the primary concerns the text invites the reader to contemplate is the confusion Orla feels about her identity. She is under constant pressure to decide 'who she is' and to create a coherent personality for herself among a range of conflicting interpellations. Initially, the novel seems to be structured like a traditional *Bildungsroman*, but instead of completing her quest for a stable identity and acquiring a natural place in a hegemonic and patriarchal social order, Orla, and the reader, discovers that multiple subject positions provide an opportunity for diversity and change. When Orla gets to Tubber she realises she is two people:

> Orla the daughter of Elizabeth, the niece of Auntie Annie, the cousin of the
>
> people of Tubber, and Orla the schoolgirl from Dublin, the friend of Aisling, the
>
> Irish scholar. She has either to be two people at the same time, which is a hard
>
> thing to be, especially when you are thirteen and a half. Or she has to choose to
>
> be just one of them. That is also very hard – not the choice, which is simple, but
>
> the consequences. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 30)

Orla's confusion and despair stem from a desire for a stable, unified self without contradictions, and the choice she makes is to be 'Orla the schoolgirl from Dublin'. The crisis this creates is resolved only by the end of her stay in the Gaeltacht, when she

realises that she need not choose one identity for herself, but may occupy and dance between multiple subject positions.

Liberal humanist subjectivity, that is, the illusion that the individual has an essential core of being and is the origin of meaning, is exposed as mere fantasy in this novel. The notion of a transcendental ego as master and source of meanings is challenged in intertextual references, which show subjectivity to be a socially produced effect formed in language, which offers the possibility of meaning. The reader of *The Dancers Dancing* and the characters in it are intertextual subjects influenced and interpellated by a range of texts. The characters, the reader notices, situate themselves in relation to texts they are exposed to, such as literature, film, songs and poetry, just as the reader occupies certain positions whilst reading the text. Some characters in the novel, for example, 'read' their surroundings according to films: Aisling registers Michaél's appearance by reference to *Cool Hand Luke* and Orla compares Aisling's mother's looks to Marilyn Monroe's (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 93, 172). Sava, likewise, employs the image of Elizabeth Taylor starring in *National Velvet* to describe Pauline's beauty, self-consciously highlighting how the subject's engagement with the world is understood in terms of the imagery circulating in culture (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 87).

Orla is exposed to alternative discourses during her time in the *Gaeltacht*; Constantly torn between different subject positions, she feels she must cling to the old, for fear of rejection by her friends. In a text which deals with the pressure society exerts on subjects to find a single non-contradictory identity, the reader is invited to acknowledge that identity consists of a range of subject positions that often conflict. Western metaphysical logic categorises and clarifies by operating in terms of binary oppositions, without acknowledging the invasion of the other into the selfsame. Exposed to this logic, Orla mistakenly feels that she must discard or hide many of the positions she occupies in culture and choose just one. This way she can 'know herself'

and be 'known'. By travelling this journey with Orla, the reader is invited to see liberal

humanist subjectivity as an illusion.

The text's emphasis on the cultural, linguistic construction of the individual is

highlighted in its use of English, Irish and Hiberno-English. The move from Dublin to

Donegal is a move from city to country, from the English language to the Irish language

and the whole way of life inscribed in each. Those things that appear to be natural in

either place are exposed as culturally constructed and as having imposed needless limits

on the subjects of that culture. When Orla arrives in Tubber and decides to be 'Orla the

schoolgirl from Dublin',

> It is odd changing the way she looks at Tubber and the people in it, seeing them
>
> and talking about them with the eyes of Orla the schoolgirl, not the eyes of Orla
>
> the niece of Annie Crilly, the daughter of Tom who went to Dublin. It is odd how
>
> different the two sets of eyes have to be, and even odder how different the
>
> languages of the two Orlas are. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 30-31)

This recognition of the role of language in the construction of meanings and values

highlights linguistic and thus cultural limitations on the range of options available to

subjects in certain times and places. The text is peppered with Irish words and phrases,

some of which are explained to the reader, for example 'Bean Uí Luing—Mrs. Lang',

and some of which are not, such as '*a stór*' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 13, 14). The languages

are not only juxtaposed in the text, but are also combined in one chapter called 'A

traditional Irish schoolhouse', which is written in English but is a direct translation of

Irish. The result is a sort of exaggerated Hiberno-English: 'Repeat the pupils the

sentences after her, and then learn they them by clean mind. And they learning by clean

mind it is able with you to hear their brains working, like to a machine a-humming, even

only over the curtain' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 36). As a hybrid form of English and Irish, Hiberno-English refutes the 'purity' associated with either language.[48]

These differing registers of Irish and English invite readers to recognise the role language plays in the construction of meanings and values in culture. Different voices and languages signal the absence of a single privileged discourse; they undermine the illusion of reality and point to a rejection of the notion that one voice or perspective or language can map reality. In using a language with someone else, there is an assumption that the situation is governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by the speakers; despite whatever differences might be in play, it is assumed that the participants are engaged in the same game. In this text we see that the game is not the same for all players. The different languages and dialects in the text critique the notion of being able to directly and faithfully express reality in language, as realist novels purport to do. In light of Saussurean linguistics, it is clear that translation does not constitute a simple correspondence between languages, and that ideas, therefore, do not exist outside of language. This prompts the realisation that cultural arrangements are not static and might be changed; things need not necessarily remain as they are.

Orla embraces Irish as easily as English. She expresses embarrassment, though, at being able to speak Irish in a Donegal dialect, which may stem from a fear of her peers realizing her links with the local community, rather than a dislike for the Irish language. Nevertheless, this calls into question how 'pure' a language can be, and thus, how uncontaminated a stable identity can be. According to Orla, places and family names in Tubber, when spoken in Irish, seem much more important and elegant than in 'their own funny Donegal English' which makes them sound 'faintly ridiculous' (Ní

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[48] This evokes Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Yeats's *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, two of the best known plays of the Celtic Literary Revival, which employed Hiberno-English. It also gestures towards what is generally regarded as the first Irish novel, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), the narrator of which speaks an English influenced by the rhythms of Irish.

Dhuibhne 1999, 31). This 'funny Donegal English' is offered to the reader for consideration in the twelfth chapter, which is told in Donegal dialect: 'Well the morning was very wet. But after the dinner the sun came out, it did aye. And it was then that Pauline came up with the bright idea that the whole lot of them, herself and the other one from Derry and the two weans from Dublin, would head out into the garden' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 42). These colloquialisms, 'weans' and 'aye', remind the reader of Orla's disgust when Sandra says 'youse' rather than 'you'. Orla's hybrid subjectivity as a mixture of Dublin and Tubber, the child of Irish and English parents, and the discomfort this promotes is displayed when she makes clear that she despises English spoken 'improperly':

> Orla has a special linguistic mission in life, and it is not the mission of every
> good citizen, which is, according to the teachers in her school, to speak Irish. It
> is rather to stamp out every trace of local English dialect from her surroundings.
> (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 12)

Hybridity, whether in subjectivity or in language, is not acceptable to Orla, who craves stability and purity.

Orla's snobbish dislike of colloquialisms and improper grammar and pronunciation calls to mind the superior status of English in eighteenth-century Ireland, when it was seen as 'an essential enabling stage on the path to progress and civility for the Irish people' (Ó Tuathaigh 2005, 45). In Ireland, English, rather than Irish became the language of government and administration, and those who did not speak it properly were not only disadvantaged, but were figured as uncivilized. The English and Irish languages, in a similar vein, are shown to assert influences in certain, specific contexts in the novel. When supervised by the teachers in a school environment, for example, the children sing Irish songs but when alone on the beach at night smoking cigarettes and

drinking Coca Cola, they sing Beatles songs.[49] The Irish books read in the schoolhouse are also replaced by more contemporary English novels for recreational reading.[50] This alerts the reader to the hybrid status of language in Ireland, as well as pointing to the *Gaeltacht* as a constructed phenomenon; its status as part of a concerted effort to keep alive Ireland's mother tongue, and its attendant connections with traditional culture and identity, are highlighted and critiqued.[51] Set just prior to Ireland's accession into the European Economic Community, and at a time of increased commercialism and modernization, the text points to the considerable challenges in restoring Irish or even bilingualism to the country. This is especially due to 'the geocultural location of Ireland in the twentieth century, right in the middle of the Anglo-American highway of communications and entertainment, increasingly the main artery of a global technology whose dominant language was English' (Ó Tuathaigh 2005, 51). The difficulty in 'de-anglicising' Ireland and restoring the 'purity' of the mother tongue and all its attendant connotations is gestured to in the text, whose characters are more influenced by British and American texts than Irish ones.

Orla's subjectivity is discursively constructed initially by fictions or textual constructs, and primarily British ones. Books define how Orla sees herself and her surroundings; apart from *Heidi*, her favourite books are those written by Enid Blyton. These texts, that is, language, teach her what is 'normal':

> She'd like to be Jo at the Chalet, or the twins at St. Clare's, or, most of all,
>
> Darrell Rivers at Malory Towers, with whom Orla had always identified
>
> absolutely. Darrell was beautiful, in a low-key way – you knew this although it

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[49] During their night-time trip to the beach, the teenagers sing, 'We all live in a yellow submarine [...]. Yesterday. She loves ya yeah yeah yeah'(Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 214). However, during their supervised walks to the beach, they sing Irish songs like 'Goirtear di Erika' and ballads like 'I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls' (Ní Dhuibhne, 1999, 146, 149).

[50] The children learn from 'the great classics of Ireland': *Jimín, Rotha Mór an tSaoil, Peig*, and *An tOileánach* (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 36).

[51] At the end of the nineteenth century, as part of a 'de-anglicising' measure, it was determined that 'the restoration of the Irish language as the national vernacular was the cornerstone of [the] project of national reconstruction' (Ó Tuathaigh 2005, 48). For an insightful discussion of the Irish Language's connection to national identity and the effect of political and cultural changes on it, see Ó Tuathaigh (2005).

was never stated in the book, where the ostentatious beauties [...] were always

stupid, and bad. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 27)

Texts about British girls in boarding schools provide Orla with a conventional model of

girls' ideal behaviour. Such novels influence her decisions about what is socially

acceptable and what must be hidden. At one stage, she points out a secret pathway to

Pauline only because she feels it is legitimised by such fiction: 'the top of the cliff is

called the Seven Bends, it could be a title for an Enid Blyton book, which is why Orla

feels it's a secret which can be shared' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 155). Fiction not only

influences Orla's behaviour but also offers her a way of literally seeing the world; on

her way to Aunt Annie's house the street spreads before her like a framed picture:

'Balm of Gilead is a phrase that comes into her head. She does not know why, or even

where it comes from. [...] She has read this phrase in some novel, maybe *Little Women*

or some novel like that (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 189). Orla's reaction to the Enid Blyton

texts demonstrates that, although influenced by them, she is not entirely at their mercy.

Exposed to competing discourses, she recognises that she will never occupy a position

like the fictional Darrel Rivers does. Subjectivity is formed in language and language

consists of more than such realist narratives. If meanings are made in language, and are

not natural, but cultural, then meanings can change. The subject, although linguistically

constructed, is not confined to an eternal reproduction of those meanings and values;

constituted by one set of meanings, it is open to change if new ones are encountered. It

can move between discourses inscribed in its culture, which allows for the possibility of

putting together new discourses in the process.

The title of the chapter following her dream of being like Darrell from *Malory*

Towers, 'But Orla knows the score', highlights Orla's recognition that her life is entirely

different to Enid Blyton's creation (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 29). Provided with an 'ideal'

position for a girl of her age, she rejects it, not because she does not want it, but because

it is unavailable in the society in which she exists. She does not live in a world with 'perfect absent father[s]', dead mothers or distant parents, like the girls in Enid Blyton novels (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 29). Instead, she is constantly aware of the close proximity of her Aunt Annie and numerous relatives during her time in the *Gaeltacht*. *The Dancers Dancing* draws attention to the artificial space created in the boarding schools of Enid Blyton and how little it has to offer Orla, an Irish girl with family in close proximity at all times.

The figure who most closely resembles Darrell Rivers in *The Dancers Dancing* is Aisling. Although she contests the dominant discourse, Orla can only imagine an ideal version of herself by reference to a cultural code; she does not want to be told that she looks like her Auntie Annie and would prefer to be told she looks like Twiggy or Mary Quant. She does not aspire to look or act like anyone Irish, apart from her friend Aisling, perhaps due to a lack of female role models to aspire to in an Ireland recovering from De Valera's conservatism. Orla admires Aisling, who always seems to look right and has an ostensibly perfect, suburban life (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 29). Aisling represents an alternative discourse in the text: a suburban, middle-class, complacent one, which the reader cannot help but resist because it is so tedious. She is never explicitly criticised in the text, but the information offered to the reader suggests a blandness irreconcilable with any role model status. She is both reminiscent of the perfect Darrell Rivers and of Barthes's description of the classic realist text, which turns culture into nature in an effort to establish reality, or 'life', which 'becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas' (1990, 206). Aisling's name means 'dream', which she represents for Orla, but it is a dream from which the reader is consistently alienated. Her name also calls attention to the 'Aisling' poems practised by bards in eighteenth-century Ireland. These poems typically envision a woman as the allegorical representation of Ireland, who laments the state of the country and waits for

deliverance 'from abroad in the person of a gallant national saviour' (Kiberd 1996, 362). The passive and languishing nature of the *spéirbhean* or skywoman of the poems is implicitly rejected in the text's figuration of Aisling as such a complacent character.[52] Like the *spéirbhean*'s stereotypical representation, she is hardly an inspiration for positive action and change.

By drawing attention to Blyton's boarding school stories, the text highlights its own fictionality as a sort of Irish revision of those stories. The novel not only points out the foreign and illusory nature of Enid Blyton texts for Orla and for the reader but also provides an alternative to such texts, and the limited positions they offer. The lack of such texts for Irish readers has only recently begun to be acknowledged and dealt with to a certain extent. Irish critic Angela Bourke notes that when she was growing up, the written word outside of school dealt almost exclusively with England. She says of the Enid Blyton mysteries and boarding-school books:

> Nowhere in them were children taught by nuns, as we were. Nowhere was Ireland or Irish mentioned. Instead children learned French, from teachers called *Ma'm'selle*; they drank ginger beer; they met the vicar, and the vicar's wife, and the helmet-wearing policemen called P. C. Something-or-other. No priests, no *gardaí*, no changing baby brother's nappies, no going to mass, no first communion. (1997, 302)

The cultural effect of this lack of Irish literature for girls is demonstrated in the confusion and despair Orla feels. Rather than create an Irish Darrell Rivers, however, the text offers a confused protagonist recognisable to Irish readers, instead of perpetuating the illusions of perfection found in *Malory Towers*. The absence of an Irish Enid Blyton creates a space in Irish literature, but the novel does not simply try to fill

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[52] Kiberd also points out that the structure and content of the Aisling was rigidly formulaic: the woman always foretold of her liberation, and thus the revival of Ireland's fortunes. This always depended on the arrival of a saviour, and 'in vain did feminists point out that her original problems were due to a similar sort of English gallant: men were the smiters in this monodrama, women the smitten' (Kiberd 1996, 362)

this gap. Instead, it offers itself as alluding to the space: it does not take the place of the genre but redefines it for an Irish context. Kristeva writes that Bakhtin 'considers writing as a reading of the anterior literary corpus and the text as an absorption of and a reply to another text' (1980c, 69). The novel, then, is not a purely Irish version of other texts written before it, but includes them inside it. The space that the novel occupies, like that of the dance mentioned in its title, is intertextual.

The reader might experience jubilation not only in the dance the text performs with different intertexts, but also in its questioning of the category of *children's* literature as distinct and stable. Although the text is an Enid Blyton revision, it is not written purely for children but for adults too. Many children's stories create worlds where childhood is uncontaminated, distinct and contained; by contrast, *The Dancers Dancing* charts children's transition to adulthood. At the beginning of the narrative Orla and her friends act like children; only interested in sweets, their main concern is whether the bus will stop in Northern Ireland so that they can buy *Mars Bars* and *Marathons*: 'they concentrate fiercely on Opal Fruits and Mars Bars. They exchange pithy descriptions of sweets they once ate and adored. Chewy tangy lemon and lime. Thick rich chocolate peanuts' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 15). At the *céilís*, boys and girls are obliged to dance with one another and some of them quickly develop partnerships of convenience. Aisling, Seamas, Orla and Alaisdair establish relationships with each other which involve no sexual feelings or even proper conversation. The girls have no interest in the opposite sex and Orla feels abnormal for liking Alaisdair, even platonically. Sandra 'doesn't like fellas' and she and Aisling call boys 'weeds'; 'Not talking to boys is not a question of language difficulties, for them, but of principle. Yuck! Who'd want to talk to them!' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 49). However, during the course of the summer, Orla's transition to adulthood is marked on her body when she gets her first period. She

becomes interested in Micheál and forms the beginning of a potentially sexual

relationship with him. Sweets, in turn, disappear almost entirely from the narrative.

Whereas Enid Blyton's heroines remain asexual children, even in their teens,

The Dancers Dancing demonstrates that childhood and adulthood are not diametrically

opposed. Traditional conceptions of childhood as a privileged zone of innocence are

shown to be culturally constructed when Orla pretends not to understand things that she

knows perfectly well. As part of being a young girl, she must feign innocence so as not

to offend adults: 'Knowing too much is a burden Orla has been given to carry, because

she is a girl. Girls read and learn and in consequence know too much. Nobody in Ireland

likes a child who knows anything' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 34).[53] The purity and freedom

conventionally associated with childhood are juxtaposed with the fact that her mother,

at least, believes that 'Orla has no right to be a child. Nobody has or ever had; that is the

thinking. Children are there to carry out adults' orders, first and foremost. Their

feelings, and adults do not believe they have any, simply don't matter' (Ní Dhuibhne

1999, 137). The text's deconstruction of a binary opposition between childhood and

adulthood is particularly significant in relation to the setting of the novel. Orla grows up

at a time when the concept 'teenager' was relatively new and had only begun to be

acknowledged in the 1960s. The sexual revolutions of the 1970s pushed back the age of

adulthood and sexual maturity and shifted the age of growing up. References in the text

to Mary Quant, Twiggy, the Beatles and Elvis alert the reader to the cultural revolution

taking place at the time. Although perhaps slower to absorb these cultural changes than

other European countries, Ireland's pace quickened after De Valera left office; the

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[53] Writers of the Celtic Revival, such as W.B. Yeats often treated childhood as a sacred, uncorrupted time. Kiberd notes: 'Most writers of the Irish Revival identified their childhood with that of the Irish nation: those hopeful decades of slow growth before the fall into murderous violence and civil war. [...] Childhood was identified as a kind of privileged zone, peopled with engaging eccentrics, doting grandmothers and natural landscapes. [....] This early Yeatsian attitude is based on the widespread but false assumption that childhood exists outside the culture in which it is produced as a state of unspoilt nature, and on the related assumption that children's literature can preserve for all values which are constantly on the verge of collapse' (1996, 101, 104).

economic modernization instigated by Lemass made the 1960s a decade of social and cultural transformation (Owens Weekes 2000, 103). Orla must find a way to cope with the changes she personally experiences, as well as confronting the transitory nature of women's rights, so different to the way of life of previous generations.

The reader is invited to join her on this journey by means of intertextual references. It is a journey which does not end, as the text can only be experienced '*in an activity of production*. It follows that the Text cannot stop' (Barthes 1977a, 157). The text is an 'activity of production' rather than a closed work because it is

> made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. (Barthes 1977b, 148)

Unlike classic realist texts, which strive to steer the reader in a specific direction, presenting apparently definitive meanings and granting them a unified subjectivity, *The Dancers Dancing* is not a text to be passively consumed, but rather, actively produced by the reader. In it, 'there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object' (Barthes 1975, 16). The reader is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, any more than the writer is: 'This "I" which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)' (Barthes 1990, 10). This reader, then, produces the meanings of the text as the focus of discursive knowledge. Intertextual references to literary, social and historical texts allow *The Dancers Dancing* to offer a range of interpellations to the reader, who can choose among them as a subject continually in process.

The text's inclusion and rewriting of intertexts implicitly undermines the traditional notion of the Author as the source of a text's meaning; a writer is also a

reader: 'The one who writes is the same as one who reads. Since his interlocutor is a

text, he himself is no more than a text rereading itself as it rewrites itself' (Kristeva

1980c, 86-87). Meaning, Kristeva indicates here, is not a fixed essence inherent in the

text; the writer is not an authoritative presence 'behind' the text when that writer is a

reader at the same time. The Author has traditionally been thought to '*nourish* the book,

which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation

of antecedence to his work as a father to his child' (Barthes1977b, 145). The notion of

the autonomous Author as origin of a text's meanings is presented as a fabrication in

The Dancers Dancing's inclusion of numerous intertexts and the new perspectives

offered on them. The author's subjectivity is constructed in language and thus provides

no Authority on what the text might ultimately mean, but rather 'is born simultaneously

with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing'

(Barthes 1977b, 145). The ideological figure of the Author merely 'marks the manner in

which we fear the proliferation of meaning', and its exposure as such opens up

meanings to plurality in the text; options are broadened and greater potential for change

is imagined (Foucault 1991, 119).

The death of the Author has been objected to by many feminists, such as

Nancy K. Miller (1989, 104) and Patricia Waugh (1992, 194), who claim that it

encourages the eradication of the female subject. They fail to acknowledge that in order

to escape a logic of mastery and authority, the feminine must also be denied 'firstness'

and the logic of binary oppositions challenged: it is mastery that causes one term in a set

of terms to be seen as 'weaker'. A Feminism that bases its politics on privileging the

feminine reproduces the hegemonic principles on which misogyny is based. Feminists

who claim to want to break boundaries and reject restrictions and limitations might heed

Barthes' statement that 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to

furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (1977b, 147). *The Dancers*

Dancing evades the limitations imposed by authorial intention as explanation, and invites the reader to reflect on the political possibilities of different interpretations.

Irish Women and Dancing Subjectivity

Three characters in the text take shape by means of intertextual structures, which the reader is invited to participate in interrogating and rewriting. Orla, her mother Elizabeth, and her Aunt Annie can be read as intertextual representations of the changing subjectivity of women in Ireland. I will firstly examine their subjectivity as it may be read in the text and then investigate how the reader is invited to question that representation of Irish women. To read these characters is not to engage in granting them any sort of life outside the text, but rather to examine them as networks of citations. In *S/Z* Barthes explains that

> it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him off the page in order
>
> to turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): *the*
>
> *character and the discourse are each other's accomplices* [...]. Such is
>
> discourse: if it creates characters, it is not to make them play among themselves
>
> before us but to play with them [...]. The characters are types of discourse and,
>
> conversely, the discourse is a character like the others. (1990, 178-179)

I will therefore read the characters as 'types of discourse' and examine which knowledges influence them and what the reader might be invited to think of these.

Reading the novel in light of 'Choreographies', an interview Christie McDonald conducted with Jacques Derrida in 1981, I argue that the *céilí* dance provides a positive space for a new generation of Irish women. The interview, like *The Dancers Dancing*, appeals to the logic of stepping *beyond*, a notion played out in the motif of the dance, which challenges the notion of place. The interview also addresses how to deal with a

feminist inheritance—whether to work from the original 'matrix' of the feminist

movement or to question it and what it represented. The figure of Aunt Annie provides

an opportunity for Orla to look at her feminist and nationalist inheritance, and she

figures out how to cope with them in her final dance.

Auntie Annie, The Irish Literary Revival and The Myth of Mother Ireland

Auntie Annie's characterisation represents a starting-point for the novel's account of

folklore, literature, and the Irish Celtic Revival. An old woman living in a cottage in

rural Ireland may remind the reader of W.B. Yeats's and Lady Gregory's ideologically

motivated play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. This product of the New Irish Theatre Movement

at the turn of the century presented a nationalist iconography that appropriated women's

bodies in its own interests. Such textual representations were crucial to the feminisation

of Ireland and the idealisation of mothers as figures to nationalize Irish children. The

story of an old woman who is transformed into a beautiful young peasant woman,

Cathleen Ní Houlihan pervaded the Irish consciousness as a symbol of Ireland.[54] The

play tells of an old woman who wanders the country because her 'four beautiful green

fields', denoting the four provinces of Ireland, were taken from her by 'strangers in the

house', denoting the coloniser (Yeats 1966, 250). She wanders with the 'hope of getting

[her] beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of [her] house'

(Yeats 1966, 253) At the end of the play, she transforms into a young woman with 'the

walk of a queen' and inspires young men to take up arms against the British in the

Rebellion of 1798 (Yeats 1966, 256).[55] At a time when Irish feminism was truly active,

this play put the concerns of Irish women firmly to one side, privileged the nationalist

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[54] For more on Cathleen Ní Houlihan as detrimental to women's concerns see Antoinette Quinn (1997).
[55] See Howes (1996) for an analysis of Yeats's nationalist writings in conjunction with theories on gender and class.

cause and presented a new nationalist code for Irish womanhood.[56] Catherine B. Shannon notes that, 'despite the prominent roles women played in Irish political and cultural revivals between 1880 and 1921, a dominant feature of the post-independence era was the almost total absence of women on the Irish political stage' (1997, 262). The conflation of woman and nation was to have a negative effect on successive generations of women.

The effect of such adulation of Cathleen Ní Houlihan is symbolised in the crippled nature of Aunt Annie's body, which is out of her control, symbolically as a result *not* of the British colonization of Mother Ireland, but of the colonization of women and their bodies by the ideals of the Celtic Revival and the De Valera era.[57] Aunt Annie is crippled and literally cannot dance; the appropriation of her and Irish women's bodies in the name of nationalism is shown to be starkly at odds with the lived experience of real women. The Celtic Revival's idealisation of women and Western Ireland as pure and sacred has resulted in something that Orla finds grotesque. Severely embarrassed by her aunt, she goes so far as to deny her in public and to wish she were dead. Orla, like most of her generation, is repulsed by this past and wishes only to ignore it. Romantic dreams of a feminised nation were appropriated as much by militant nationalism as the Literary Revival, and feminists in the 1970s began to see such ideals as antithetical to positive social change.

The Dancers Dancing is set in a decade of immense changes. Ireland's decision to join the European Economic Community, taken in 1972, combined with the country's push towards industrialization and modernization meant that 'the language of cultural protectionism became an embarrassment' and was shunned in order 'to enable the Irish

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[56] For another point of view on this see Mary E. Daly, who challenges the notion that Irish women have been more oppressed than women in other Western European countries in the interwar years (1997).

[57] This is not to imply that it was only men who were responsible for revitalising Ireland's cultural traditions at the turn of the nineteenth century; as stated above, one major proponent of it was Lady Augusta Gregory, and Kilfeather notes that women were involved, if on a less public scale, in fostering Irish traditions and learning Irish in the Gaeltachts (2005, 102). The point here is not to place blame on men, but to take stock of the ideology and images that issued forth from the representations of the country in terms of woman/mother.

to become confident of their identity in the larger European family' (Ó Tuathaigh 2005, 54). Concurrent with the drive for economic modernisation came the beginnings of 'second-wave' feminism: the Irish Women's Liberation Movement began to gain attention in the country in 1971. The synchronized occurrence of modernisation and feminism resulted in a forward-looking aspect in those who wanted change. Joe Cleary explains that 'because Ireland was construed as an oppressively traditional society, modernisation by convergence with "the Western world" was viewed by contrast as an emancipatory process that would liberate Irish women' (2005, 16). Feminism and modernization shared a view of Ireland as achieving liberation from a restrictive, traditional past. Ireland's national traditions, especially those perpetuated as a result of the Celtic Revival, were perceived by feminists as patriarchal and repressive and began to be rejected and forgotten in favour of a fight for women's rights and attention to what the future might hold.

The ideals of the Celtic Revival are challenged throughout the text, but *The Dancers Dancing* offers a nuanced view of them. It invites the reader to see Aunt Annie not as representative of a past that should be forgotten, but of one that was culturally constructed in the first place and which can therefore be reconfigured. The damage that can be caused by perpetuating myths is shown in the fact that Orla cannot bring herself to acknowledge Aunt Annie in front of her friends. Her aunt's difference plagues her and does not correspond with an image of what she thinks her friends would expect. However, when her friends and teachers gather in Aunt Annie's house, Orla is amazed to discover that they do not find her grotesque, but go so far as to praise and admire her. Orla, in turn, starts to see her from a different point of view. The text suggests to the reader that the period in women's history that Annie represents should be acknowledged, questioned, and reconfigured, rather than ignored and rejected.[58] When

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[58] Although Irish feminists were active in the early twentieth century, specifically in *Cumbann na mBan* (women's auxiliary corps to the Irish Volunteers), there was criticism that they 'accepted a subservient

Orla finally feels comfortable about her Aunt's existence, she experiences a feeling of

relief: 'Peace seeps into her soul from the mellow walls, the rocky bed of the floor.

Flames flicker in the range, spoons clink against plates, voices rise and fall in

meaningless chatter: it is a tune that has been played in this kitchen often before. For

hundreds of years. Right here in this room' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 223).

One reason why Orla feels almost proud of her Aunt is that two of her teachers

have come to record Annie's stories. It was common practice at the time to record the

folk tales of older Irish people, and reminds the reader of *Peig*, a text the children read

at the *Gaeltacht*, which was transcribed in a similar fashion. Peig Sayers (1873-1958),

from the Blasket Islands in West Kerry, was a woman with a wealth of folklore who

told her stories to those working for the Irish Folklore Commission.[59] These were

published in the form of an autobiography, *Peig*, in 1936, and told of the hardships she

suffered following the deaths and emigration of her children.[60] Even today the book

retains an important position on the Irish second-level syllabus but it has been mocked

and derided by recent generations: seen as a litany of complaints from a silly old

woman, it has not received the respect it deserves as a founding Irish language text by a

woman.[61] In the figure of Aunt Annie, Orla and the reader are invited to rethink their

opinions of such texts and to realise that such people may be worth listening to. They

are the sources of an aspect of Irish history which was appropriated by the Celtic

Revival, but can now be reconfigured. The text includes references to various texts and

their earlier cultural contexts, allowing them to be acknowledged, but also to be

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status for women in the struggle for independence, and that they were willing to postpone the
achievement of equality for women until after the settlement of the national question' (Kilfeather 2005,
103).

[59] The Irish Folklore Commission, founded in 1935, was committed to recording, cataloguing and
publishing Irish folktales, mostly in the Irish language. Workers for the Commission travelled around the
country with tape recorders until 1971 when the Commission was disbanded and its work was carried on
by the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin.

[60] Peig Sayers's autobiography, which 'told the story of life on [a] small Irish-speaking island' was
transcribed in order to preserve 'the story of an ancient civilisation in the process of disappearing' (Riggs
and Vance 2005, 250).

[61] Flann O'Brien's *An Béal Bocht* ('The Poor Mouth'), an Irish-language text published in 1941, satirises
the type of hardship documented in Peig Sayer's autobiography.

reconsidered in a new light, in a new context. *The Dancers Dancing* absorbs them, and invites contemporary readers to reply to them, as 'literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure' (Kristeva 1980c, 64).

These intertextual references challenge the notion of writing as territorialism and demarcation of property, borrowing in order to subvert the concepts of original integrity and textual fixity. *Peig* and similar texts with links to the Celtic Literary Revival are reconfigured in a new context where they are demythologised and ironically employed in an effort to construct feminist futures. Rather than trying to ignore her detested history, Orla eventually confronts and questions it, encouraging the reader to do so too. At a time when feminism in Ireland was burgeoning, and many women connected Irish traditional culture with patriarchal oppression, the text suggests that an interest in the nation and feminism need not be mutually exclusive. Significantly, it is in the *Gaeltacht*, the very arena traditionally thought to signify patriarchal nationalism, that new perspectives for Irish women are envisaged.

Challenges to the feminisation and idealisation of Ireland, especially rural Ireland, are posed in a number of ways. Dramatists and poets of the Celtic Revival emphasised Irish primitivism as part of their anti-imperialist agenda, but *The Dancers Dancing* deconstructs the opposition between 'pure', 'primitive' Western Ireland, and modern, industrialised Dublin.[62] The Irish Cultural Revival's mythologizing of Ireland as a pre-modern land of innocent peasants with warm and instinctive ways is discredited as Killer Jack, a promiscuous local teacher, expresses sexual interest in Pauline, one of his students. The myth of the peasants of rural Ireland representing a noble alternative to the vulgarity of urban life is also questioned, for example, when Sava and Sean go for a walk on a local hill and Sean is more preoccupied with thoughts of televisions and technology than whether it is 'the most beautiful place in the world' (Ní Dhuibhne

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[62] Cleary notes that the Catholic Church shared this conception of Ireland as wholesomely spiritual and untainted by modernity. In fact, centuries of persecution for Catholic beliefs only served to strengthen the spiritual values of the Irish (2005, 13).

1999, 163). Traditional representations of 'Irishness' are subject to pressure in this text, which encourages readers to become sceptical of the 'naturalness' of images of nationality.

The mystery and charm attributed to rural Ireland in the Celtic Revival's anti-imperialist agenda is also confronted in Tubber's proximity to the border of Northern Ireland, where such romantic nationalism has resulted in violence and deaths.[63] The border separating northern and southern Ireland, in existence since the early twentieth century, also emphasizes Ireland's hybrid status, and calls into question the coherence of Irish identity. Jacqueline, from Derry, is a Catholic who comes from Northern Ireland to the *Gaeltacht* to learn Irish. The teenager's presence there calls attention to the importance of the Irish language as a signifier of Irish nationalism and the adversarial and binary relationship between the Irish and English languages as conceived in culture. Northern Ireland, as part of Britain, gives no official status to the Irish language, and Jacqueline's attendance at the *Gaeltacht* might be more a reflection of a steadfast connection to Irish nationalism than an educational move. Ó Tuathaigh notes that a revitalised Irish-language movement emerged in Northern Ireland from the later 1960s; it was 'strongly urban-based and frequently embedded in the most assertive communities of republican political dissent' (2005, 56-57). Jacqueline, whose father is in Long Kesh prison, which implies that he has IRA connections, strongly differentiates herself from the British, from unionists, and from Protestants. Her outburst at the 'fucking Brits', though, appears to echo what she has heard adults say, and seems a mere citation, and as much a signifier of nationalism as her presence in the *Gaeltacht* is (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 63).

Even though she may identify herself as Irish and Catholic in Northern Ireland, Jacqueline is not viewed by the Dublin girls as 'one of them', and appears to occupy an

[63] The novel's setting in 1972 significantly calls to mind 'Bloody Sunday', when thirteen civilian marchers were shot dead by paratroopers in Derry on January 30th. Its setting in July in particular calls to mind 'Bloody Friday', when IRA bombs killed nineteen people in Belfast on July 21, 1972.

'outsider' position, no matter what her location. Her style of dress and political

awareness is registered by Orla and Aisling as adult and intimidating, her accent as

different and foreign (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 63). Pauline's subjectivity is even more

heterogeneous; her father is Protestant, which signifies Englishness for Orla, and

prompts her to ask Pauline why she wants to learn Irish. Questions are posed about the

difference between being 'Irish' and 'Northern Irish', questions which are not answered

and left for readers to consider (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 65). *The Dancers Dancing*

interrogates the borders we construct to define our identities. They provide a sense of

security by fixing things in place, reinforcing our knowledge, and regulating

differences. The border is a dividing line, an edge that separates and defines, keeping

things both in and out, but here, in the figures of Jacqueline and Pauline, the border is

exposed as a construct. The other invades the selfsame: even though we are constantly

offered the illusion that we have a stable identity, we are constantly transgressing it.

Orla's adventures in the burn further break down the notion of rural Ireland as an

idyllic retreat. One of the purposes of sending children to the *Gaeltacht*, we are told, is

in the hope that they will learn

> something cultural, the nature of which nobody quite understands. All that is
>
> known about this quality is that it is healthier than the culture the students are
>
> accustomed to in the city—as the air is fresher, the fields greener, and the water
>
> clearer, so is the culture itself more spontaneous, fresh and unadulterated. (Ní
>
> Dhuibhne 1999, 38)

Orla's forbidden explorations along the stream are initially presented as romantic

opportunities to embrace nature, truly purifying experiences in a 'spontaneous, fresh'

atmosphere. At the outset, nature is presented as a sphere 'outside' of culture, where

Orla can find the 'reality she is looking for [...] inside herself, hidden from all eyes' (Ní

Dhuibhne 1999, 68). After her first visit to the burn, Orla feels 'completely herself. Orla

Herself. Not Orla the Daughter of Elizabeth, Orla the Pride of Rathmines, Orla the

Betrayer of Tubber. Just Orla' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 73). As soon as teatime comes,

though, she reverts to secretly guarding herself. Nature seems to endow Orla with a

space outside of culture, where she is freed from the confusion she feels about her

different selves, and where she can find a whole, stable, 'natural' self, unconnected to

the different positions she normally agonises over.

However, this notion of nature and rural Ireland as 'unadulterated' and

'spontaneous' is challenged intertextually and exposed as an illusion which has had a

tragic effect on women's lives. The five chapters describing Orla's retreat into nature

are entitled like scenes in a drama: 'the burn scene one', 'the burn scene two' and so on,

until scene five (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 42, 67, 113, 193, 199). This is a one-act drama, like

many Celtic Revival plays, but it questions and challenges their idealisation of nature.

Orla spontaneously quotes the first stanza of 'Inversnaid' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

twice when she is at the burn (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 115, 202). The poem, quoted in full at

the start of the text, describes a highland stream; it is concerned with nature and

landscapes and its last stanza pleads for the preservation of wilderness. Nature, the

reader is invited to notice, is defined by a quotation; its influence is not exercised

outside of culture; our readings of it are formed, rather, in culture. The feeling of purity

and freedom Orla experiences in the tunnel stems from her familiarity with lofty nature

poetry. As Barthes explains: 'the inter-text is: the impossibility of living outside the

infinite text—whether this be Proust or the daily newspaper or the television screen: the

book creates the meaning, the meaning creates life' (1975, 36). That is, we make sense

of and construct our lives in relation to texts, including our perceptions of nature.

When she and Pauline visit the burn together, Orla suggests that they eat some

wild raspberries, and Pauline jokes that they may be poisonous. She tastes one and asks,

quoting 'Snow White', 'Mirror mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?' (Ní

Dhuibhne 1999, 115). Nature is read in terms of poetry, mythology and fairytales. The

raspberries are forbidden fruit, just as Orla is prohibited by adults from venturing into

the burn; however, these transgressions do not lead to an Edenic downfall, but to a

feeling of jubilation: 'Sweet, tangy, cool, fresh, wild, tinged with an exotic flavour, like

Turkish Delight, attar of roses, some flavour [...] that is a confirmation, for her, of the

jewel-studded world that awaits exploration' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 72). The novel

deconstructs the binary oppositions between urban and rural, corrupt and pure, inviting

the reader to acknowledge that the imposition of an idealised image on rural Irish

landscape at the turn of the century is precisely that—an *image* created in drama and

poetry, which can therefore be changed and reconfigured.

The Dancers Dancing also invites the reader to confront the harm done by

fostering an image of purity in the Irish landscape, a purity transferred onto women in a

feminized nation. The Celtic Revival's representation of women as chaste yet maternal

was further encouraged by the Catholic Church's veneration of the Virgin Mary. Church

and state worked to enforce this ideology by designating sex as purely procreative. A

significant fear, expressed in the text, is of pregnancy occurring outside of the

institution of marriage. Headmaster Joe's 'most urgent task', we are told, is 'to prevent

any sexual disaster. Pregnancy. In a college like this where the average age is twelve or

thirteen it is not a grave danger, but it still exists' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 52). Teenage

pregnancies, it seems, were certainly not unheard of in a country where sex education

was practically non-existent and where contraception was outlawed.[64]

When Orla gets her first period she has luckily been given 'advance warning' by

Elizabeth, who 'supplied a chequered and not strictly accurate account of some of the

facts of life' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 203). The Pope's blessing that sits at the end of

Elizabeth and Tom's bed reminds readers of the Church's stance on sexual activity as

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[64] In 1968, the Catholic Church reasserted its opposition to artificial contraception in the Papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

strictly for procreation inside marriage, as well as the Church and state's prohibition of contraceptives and abortion, and their concomitant insistence on controlling women's bodies.[65] Elizabeth emphasises to Orla that 'the very worst thing that could happen to any family was that their unmarried daughter would get a baby, but she did not explain exactly how this phenomenon could occur' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 203). The text gestures towards the repression of sexuality in a modernising country and the unwillingness to talk about the subject in other than repressive terms.

Because of this, unmarried mothers often kept their pregnancies secret, and had their babies adopted; an option actively encouraged by the Catholic Clergy in Ireland. During her last visit to the burn, Orla finds 'skulls. Half a dozen, a dozen, small round white skulls. Tiny skeletons, with bones as delicate as the pieces of Airfix model airplanes' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 202). This discovery directly precedes the chapter in which she gets her first period and also comes before her dream in which an illegitimate child is drowned by its mother. In the dream, the mother's name is Crilly, hinting that there may be secrets in Orla's family that she will never know about except in dreams. Nuala Crilly, who has the face of Aisling, had her baby delivered in a barn and dropped it into the waterfall that Orla visits during the day (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 210). The skulls that Orla stumbles upon invite readers to make connections between the idealisation of woman/nature and the stories and positions this denies and prohibits, as well as the ensuing harm that such exclusion can inflict on a society. Rural Ireland, previously figured in mystical and romantic terms during Orla's adventures in the tunnel, has become a space of murderous secrets. The Celtic Revival's correlation of rural Ireland

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[65] Irish law prohibited the importation and sale of contraceptives until 1979, when they became available to married couples on prescription from general practitioners. Only in 1985 was the sale of condoms without prescription legalized. These textual references might also point to the changes occurring in Ireland at the time, especially to the Irish Women's Liberation Movement's efforts to legalize contraception in the Republic. In May 1971, the IWLM organized the first public challenge to the ban on contraceptives in Ireland and brought contraceptives from Belfast to Dublin on what has been dubbed 'The Contraceptive Train'. On their arrival in Connolly Station they openly declared their illegal imports to Customs officials, challenging them to arrest them, but they were allowed to pass. The Offences Against the Person Act means that abortion remains illegal in the Republic of Ireland. In 1983 the Pro-Life Amendment was added to the Irish Constitution, conferring equal rights upon the foetus.

with femininity, simple Irish peasantry and purity, as well as the Catholic Church's

dictates, are exposed as cruel cultural constructions that made Irish women kill their

own illegitimate children for fear of society's views.

Infanticide is merely indicated in the text in Orla's visit to the burn; the reader is

not told exactly what the skulls represent, but is invited to consider the episode in

conjunction with the following chapter, in which Orla dreams of infanticide. Ironically,

this dream brings the disturbing reality of the issue to the fore. The language used to

describe the killing is poetic and dream-like; we are told that Nuala 'enters the tunnel of

foliage and walks down to the waterfall. There she takes off the baby's clothes and

drops him like a stone over the waterfall. He smiles at her as he falls like a stone into the

black skin of water' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 211). The lyrical and poetic language used

here is at odds with the poem about nature's vigour and energy that Orla quotes on her

first visit into the tunnel; it ironically brings the reader closer to a painful reality in Irish

society.

Having exposed the culturally constructed nature of rural Irish identity and

demythologised Ireland's feminization, the text invites the reader to reconsider

contemporary women's relationship to the nation. Women need not only exist as a

function of their maternity in Ireland; instead of rejecting a patriarchal nationalist

agenda, they can interrogate it and rewrite the script. If feminism and national politics

continue to be viewed as mutually exclusive,

> a feminism based on exclusion will continue to be itself excluded. [...]
>
> Feminism must interrogate nationalism, must maintain its own interests and
>
> women's interests against any monolithic national identity which perpetuates
>
> patriarchy. [...] If feminism in the south continues to regard nationalism and
>
> republicanism as contagious diseases and to protect itself from contagion by a

refusal to engage with either it will also continue to occupy the political margins.

(Meaney 1993, 236-37)

What feminists have seen as detrimental to their cause (nationalism as patriarchal) is

exposed as constructed and can therefore be reconstructed from a new point of view.

Elizabeth and Woman's Place

At the beginning of the 1960s, Eamon De Valera's vision of Cathleen Ní Houlihan still

cast a shadow over the lives of Irish women.[66] This ideology was embraced by the

Taoiseach of the new Irish Free State and even found a place in the Irish constitution.

The Dancers Dancing refers intertextually to the constitution and to Elizabeth as a

product of this myth and many similar notions regarding women's role in Ireland. De

Valera's constitution of 1937 clearly posits women as the guardians of public morals:

> The state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a
>
> support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall,
>
> therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic
>
> necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Article
>
> 41)

In Elizabeth's characterization, the text refers explicitly to this constitutional declaration

of woman's place. It is also shown to have pervaded the Irish educational system in a

debate in Orla's classroom; considering the motion that 'A Woman's Place Is in the

Home', all of her classmates agree that mothers should not work outside the home.

Notably, it is the girls in the class who nod sagely, convinced that 'a mother should

simply be a mother, just as a child is a child' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 77).[67]

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[66] Antoinete Quinn (1997) and Mary E. Daly (1997) assess the damaging effects of this image on real Irish women.

[67] Catherine B. Shannon notes that such 'educational and religious conditioning of young girls to "wife-mother roles," was hardly conducive to nurturing female career ambitions' (1997, 259).

In 'Choreographies', when asked how he would describe 'woman's place',

Derrida is wary of such a description because 'woman' should not have to be subjected

to 'topo-economical' concerns in the first place (Derrida 1988, 168). Concerned with

dividing the very notion of 'place' itself, he notes that the expression 'woman's place'

recalls the phrases 'in the home' or 'in the kitchen' (Derrida 1988, 167). The home,

however, as 'place, domicile, family, lineage, or institution' is what deconstruction

seeks to move beyond: it aims to break out of the circle of the house, the economic and

the father (Derrida 1996, 7). As well as questioning woman's *place,* Derrida

problematises the notion of 'woman' and the essence or 'truth' attributed to woman or

femininity, as even 'truth' itself is one of the foundations of phallogocentrism: 'they are

the foundations or anchorings of Western rationality (of what I have called

"phallogocentrism" [as the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male

firstness])' (Derrida 1988, 171). This repudiation of an essentialist view of woman is

highly constructive for feminisms that wish to recognise and respect difference and the

fact that women change over time in accordance with social and cultural changes. It

prevents women from being seen as an 'obvious' or unproblematic category. If there is

no such thing as 'essential woman', then she can no longer be part of a binary

opposition.

Elizabeth, who is presented as a locus of conservative discourses on what a

'woman' should be, restricts herself to the home rather than seek employment outside it.

She would not have been presented with many career options anyway, as married

women's employment outside the home was not only somewhat frowned upon, but was

impossible in the civil service, for example, where marriage bars had been firmly in

place since 1933. The text gestures towards the changes occurring for women, though,

in Elizabeth's dreams that her daughter will be a 'Junior Ex'; these visions do not

include Orla having a family of her own, but instead a career, a car, 'a snow-white

blouse and a smart tweed suit' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 75). Things would be different for

Orla not only because Ireland was modernizing economically, but because active

discrimination against women in the fields of education was being highlighted by the

Irish Women's Liberation Movement. The IWLM produced a document in 1971 called

Irish Women – Chains or Change?, which publicized their demands for women's rights,

and in 1972 The Report of the Commission on the Status of Women was published,

making recommendations on 'employment, education, jury service, taxation, law, social

welfare, rural life, political and cultural life' (Kilfeather 2005, 108). These publicized

documents, combined with Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community

in 1973, resulted in 'the removal of the marriage bar in employment, [...] the

introduction of maternity leave, greater opportunities to train at skilled trade, protection

against dismissal on pregnancy, the disappearance of advertisements specifying the sex

of an applicant for a job and greater equality in the social welfare code' (Mangan 1993,

72).

The Dancers Dancing is set at this exciting time, when change is being

demanded, but has not yet been officially put in place. Orla's plans for the future alert

the reader to how different she believes her life can be to her mother's: 'She would get

an education, get the Junior Ex, or even go to university: suddenly that possibility

became real. She could get well-off. Her life was going to be different from Elizabeth's.

Of that they both were certain' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 81). Elizabeth is, ironically,

responsible for the fact that 'Orla could go to Secondary. There would be enough

money for the uniform and the new bag and the bus fares and the books' (Ní Dhuibhne

1999, 81). Although she appears to adhere to the notion that 'a woman's place is in the

home', she 'breaks rank even in this regard' by becoming a landlady, renting out rooms

for financial reward (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 77).

Elizabeth's resistance to the idea that women should not work may come from her dual subjectivity. She is English: 'It surprises everyone to learn that Elizabeth is English. She speaks with a strong Dublin accent, she seldom refers to her past. But it is there, not a secret, just forgotten' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 123). Elizabeth barely shows any signs of her very English up-bringing: 'Her childhood was not spent swinging around lampposts on a Dublin street, as her accent and demeanour might indicate, but on a beach in the south of England. Breakwaters, bathing huts, Punch and Judy shows' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 124). However, her English past is betrayed in the fact that she turns her house into a guesthouse of sorts, just as her parents had done. As a little girl, her responsibility was to change the sign at the guesthouse saying 'Vacancies' or 'No Vacancies' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 124). The text's association of Elizabeth's Englishness with picture-postcard seaside resorts and her Irishness as learned rather than innate, constitutes a postmodern challenge to the notion that national identity is natural. National identity is denaturalized and shown to consist of a position offered in culture, from which we can 'know' ourselves. The text's citation of 'breakwaters, bathing huts, Punch and Judy shows' to denote Englishness problematises essentialist notions of national identity in cultural texts.[68] It signals the fact that the everyday objects that surround us are given meanings and turned into signs of a national culture, pointing to the narratives that set up national identity as a stable phenomenon.

Homi Bhabha explains that cultural meanings need to be repeated, reproduced and circulated for a sense of national identity to be retained: 'The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects' (1990, 297). Signifiers of national identity are repeated over and over until they are apparently naturalised. Whether these are bathing huts and Punch and Judy shows to

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[68] For an insightful analysis of Ireland as citational and of Irish national identity as constructed rather then 'natural', see Graham (2001).

signify Englishness, or rural landscapes and peasantry to signify Irishness, these signifiers 'are endowed by fantasy with meaning' and become realist representations of national identity (Easthope 1999, 22). As a postmodern text, *The Dancers Dancing* prompts an awareness that national identities are subject positions constructed and produced in culture, which set themselves up as real. Elizabeth, who grew up in England, is shown to be practically more Irish than the Irish themselves; at the same time, she is a woman who runs her own 'business'. Identities, then, the reader, is invited to consider, are not homogeneous. A range of positions exist with which we can identify, and national identity is signified only by aligning oneself with certain cultural categories. If Elizabeth is not 'naturally' Irish, but acts the part nevertheless, then the aspects of Irish nationality which restrict women must also be 'acted out'. Misogynist discourses are constructed in culture to the same extent that nationalist ones are; in Ireland's case the two have overlapped at times, but their constructed nature shows them to be open to change and reconfiguration.

Although she has converted the family's domestic space into a money-making zone, challenging 'woman's place' to a certain extent, Elizabeth does not entirely escape the conservative ideologies governing women's behaviour in Ireland. Her body is restricted, in accordance with the State's control of contraception and abortion, as well as the Catholic Church's reinvigoration of the cult of the Virgin Mary from the early twentieth century, which had 'a deep influence on the lives and imaginations of Catholic Irish women' (Kilfeather 2005, 106). Even in the early 1970s, when women began to resist the dominant ideology and to rebel, Elizabeth would have no part in it:

> Orla's father has a car but Elizabeth would never dream of trying to drive that. She belongs to a generation that catagorises her as wife and mother, not lady driver. Ladies drive, all right, in Dublin, lots of them [...] and ladies are just beginning to go to the pub and drink [...]. But not ladies like Elizabeth, who

have set rigid boundaries to the march of their personal experience, as they have

guarded their rebellious bodies in unbreachable roll-ons, rigid nylon stockings

that no breath of air could penetrate. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 76)

This description gestures to the changes occurring in women's conditions, but also to

the difficulty of transforming some women's views, who have been so infiltrated by

patriarchal ideology that they refuse to listen to resistant discourses. Restriction, a denial

of sexuality, and in some cases a denial of the body itself, is the result of conservative

discourses perpetrated by church and state:

Women in Dublin don't want to acknowledge the existence of breasts: they

haven't got them, and if they have, those protuberences [sic] certainly don't

contain anything as messy, as repulsive, as animal, as *wet*, as milk. I ask you!

Milk comes from bottles and Cow and Gate cans, thank you very much indeed!

Bosoms are dry pointy pincushions, tucked away in brassières. And there they

stay. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 56)

Women exist in Ireland to occupy a maternal role, but even that function is limited; their

idealization as mothers of the nation is starkly contrasted here with the everyday

realities of actual motherhood, as breast-feeding itself is not even considered

appropriate. Elizabeth's proud participation in the myth of the idealised and physically

restricted Irish woman merely perpetuates it and leaves her with the illusion that she has

the moral upper hand. Her acceptance of the traditional woman's role as defined by the

Catholic Church, at least in terms of how she binds her body, is proof that patriarchy's

socialisation of Irish women is omnipresent. The traditional feminine role, though,

particularly as the Catholic Church defines it, is 'grounded in a deep distrust and

loathing of femininity, [...] and those women who identify with it are also expressing a

form of self-hatred, a revulsion against themselves as women' (Meaney 1993, 231).

Rather than occupying a position of power, as she is convinced she does, Elizabeth is

acting out a role designed to keep women in a subordinate position. Her complicity with

patriarchal discourse is no solution to women's problems.

A Feminist politics based on superiority, or privileging the feminine, acts in

accordance with the hegemonic principle on which phallogocentrism operates.

Feminisms are most effective when they remember to interrogate the very foundations

on which sexual opposition is based: sexual difference has been manipulated into a

hierarchy, which must be moved beyond rather than reversed; danced beyond, rather

than marched to. 'Choreographies' starts with a quotation from Emma Goldman, a

feminist, anarchist, writer, and devoted dancer of the late nineteenth century. Goldman,

speaking about her love of dancing on one occasion, was once criticised by a male

anarchist who asserted that rather than dancing, she should engage herself in the more

serious affairs of the Cause. She replied 'if I can't dance I don't want to be part of your

revolution'. In her autobiography, Goldman explains:

> I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly
>
> thrown in my face. I did not believe that a cause which stood for a beautiful
>
> ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice,
>
> should demand the denial of life and joy. (1934, 56)

In 'Choreographies', Goldman's sentiments are used to examine similar approaches to

feminism. Goldman was a feminist but refused to define herself as such, as she saw

problems in the women's movement of her time. The women involved in the movement

perpetuated women's oppression by defending and supporting the very institutions that

enslaved them. In *Anarchism and Other Essays,* Goldman asserts that state, family, and

church condemn women to 'the life of an inferior', merely contributing to the

continuation of their oppression:

> Then there is the home. What a terrible fetich it is! How it saps the very life-
>
> energy of woman,—this modern prison with golden bars. Its shining aspect

blinds woman to the price she would have to pay as wife, mother, and

housekeeper. Yet woman clings tenaciously to the home, to the power that holds

her in bondage. (1969, 196-197)

In Goldman's opinion, the feminist movement was a bourgeois one, in which middle-

class women excluded the concerns of working-class women and were naïve in their

claims of superiority over men. Elizabeth is very similar to these middle-class women.

Mastery, or the usurpation of masculine privilege is not a solution to the problem of

phallocentrism though. As Derrida explains in 'Choreographies', this represents only

the first phase of deconstruction, in which opposed terms are inverted. In order to step

beyond this notion of mastery, the second phase involves 'a transformation or general

deformation of logic' (Derrida 1988, 175).

Elizabeth, far from being a passive victim of patriarchal culture, then, is highly

implicated in simultaneously upholding and refuting its ideals. Irish women are deeply

involved in patriarchal culture and their glorification as symbols of the nation; they are

not the innocent victims of Irish or any other kind of historical circumstance but 'have

always been implicated, even in [their] own oppression' (Meaney 1993, 238).

Elizabeth's exposure to patriarchal discourses means that her mode of resistance is

based on the same logic of binary oppositions. As far as she is concerned, life in the

home is not one of submission: 'The house is hers to order and command as she moves

through it, on her good days, with the purpose and authority of a Napoleon. The kitchen

is her command headquarters' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 58). Her 'range of command' is not

confined to the domestic; even her husband hands over his 'shiny brown pay packet' to

his wife, who has 'superior' managerial skills and decides how the money should be

spent (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 59). Elizabeth is

a matriarch to strike wonder, if not more, into the heart of the most ardent

feminist. Equality is not a concept known to women like Elizabeth, and she

certainly would not wish to fight for it if she knew what it meant. Superiority is what she has always had, at least since the day she selected Tom as a suitable partner. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 60)

Elizabeth's sense of superiority in all things pervades the text. Where gender relations are concerned, she has no doubt that she is in charge. But by perpetuating power relations in patriarchal terms of superiority/inferiority, Elizabeth does not personify change for Irish women. Although she dispels the myth of an essential maternal instinct in her treatment of Orla, and resists ideas concerning women's place to some extent, her adherence to the dominant ideology concerning women in other ways puts serious pressure on her. Confronted with a range of positions she may occupy, she occasionally submits to the pressures which envelop her and finds release in illness: 'Elizabeth well looks lovely, in Orla's estimation, but Elizabeth ill is another story. Jekyll and Hyde. She can transform herself from being a queen to being a witch, a washy green-eyed monster wrapped in skin-coloured nylon stockings' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 57). Although she occupies incompatible subject positions, Elizabeth is under pressure to locate a unified, single, coherent identity. Her 'sickness' is her release from this, mimetic of the 'madwomen in the attic' of Victorian fiction, who resorted to insanity as an escape from the intolerable pressure of finding a stable identity among irreconcilable discourses.

Orla, The Dance, and The Future of Feminism

Her daughter, Orla, escapes a similar fate by the end of her stay in the *Gaeltacht*, when she witnesses and chooses between competing discourses. Orla seems to share Emma Goldman's sentiments, and dances to a new tune instead of marching to the discourse of patriarchy like her mother. Goldman represents the notion of questioning an inherited feminism. Her 'dance' shows that she breaks 'with the most authorized, the most

dogmatic form of consensus' in feminism (Derrida 1988, 167). Referring to a step

which could possibly be taken by 'a new "idea" of woman', Derrida says 'this step only

constitutes a step on the condition that it challenge a certain idea of the *locus [lieu]* and

the place [*place*] (the entire history of the West and of its metaphysics) and that it dance

otherwise' (Derrida 198, 168). To march as a feminist is simply to reverse binary

oppositions; it is to usurp men's position as the marching ones. Rather than stay within

this frame, Orla dances around it. Her mother has stayed within the borders of

conventional feminine identity, perpetuating patriarchal ideals and those forms of

feminism that Emma Goldman criticised. Orla and the reader, however, are offered a

chance to question their feminist inheritance and to dance to a new tune. Goldman's

anarchist strategies are more suited to Orla, a child of the revolutionary 1970s, than to

her mother or aunt.

In contrast to her mother and aunt, Orla represents a new generation of women

in Ireland, who come to realise that they are thinking, choosing subjects capable of

resisting and constructing discourses. Her dance allows the reader to imagine stepping

away from the notion of Irish women's bodies as colonised territories; in her final

dance, her moving, twirling body cannot be pinned down to be colonised or

essentialised. Rather than figuring the body as a static location on which harmful

discourses can be imposed, the text invites the reader to consider bodies, especially

dancing bodies, as capable of challenging and generating meanings. Orla's adolescence

coincides with an adolescent Ireland; this period of confusion, when knowledges that

were previously unquestioningly accepted are thrown into doubt, is also a time when

Orla is torn between two identities, 'maps' she has always held in her mind which she

cannot blend together:

> Tubber is one of the maps Orla has held in her head since babyhood. There is
>
> another. That is the map of Dublin. Two sides of the Crilly coin: the good and

the bad, the tourist west and the dull east, the rare Irish and the common English, the heathery rocky lovely and the bricky breezeblock ugly, the desirable rural idyll and the unchosen urban reality. Holiday and work. Past and present. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 6)

Orla, whose star sign significantly is Gemini, experiences the dilemma of which side of the Crilly coin to display and which to hide. Mortified by her family in Tubber and her connection to rural Ireland, she is plagued by a fear that others may notice her difference—her working mother, her bargain-basement clothes, her ability to speak Irish in the local dialect, and most of all, her Auntie Annie, who is different from the 'norm' by being disabled. The reader is invited to participate in making the meaning of the text, to think about the positions Orla feels she occupies and whether they are really mutually exclusive. The constructed and illusory nature of a coherent identity is exposed when Orla decides to hide 'Orla the cousin of the people of Tubber' in favour of 'Orla the schoolgirl from Dublin'. Though hidden, the part of herself that she does not wish others to know about does not disappear but remains in her as a constant source of conflict and anxiety. It is in her final dance at the *céilí* that the oppositions between urban and rural, ancient and modern, male and female are reconfigured.

During their time in the *Gaeltacht*, the children's evening ritual is to attend the *céilí* in the schoolhouse. The motif of the *céilí* dance offers the reader a version of subjectivity that lessens Orla's burden and allows for multiplicity and difference to be thought. It is not a *solution* to her conflicting feelings, but is a relief to the extent that she need no longer discard or hide aspects of herself. Like language, dance is a process of play and a continuous deferral of fixed meaning and cannot be stabilised. The dances at the *céilí* weave a pattern: 'They are like the patterns on the crochet tablecloths sold in the souvenir shops in Tubber, or [...] the swirls cut into the stones at Newgrange' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 48). Elsewhere, the dance is compared to Carrickmacross lace and 'the

spinner spinning' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 235). As Barthes points out, the text is also made of a 'perpetual interweaving':

> *Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. (1975, 64)

Readers unmake themselves in the text just as Orla does in the dance. The reading subject is intertextual: 'reading is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority. It is a form of work; [...] the meanings I find are established not by "me" or by others, but by their systematic mark' (Barthes 1990, 10-11). The subject is lost in the web or woven pattern of the text and brings other texts to bear on it. In this text meaning is multiple and unstable; 'everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing d*eciphered*; [...] the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced' (Barthes 1977b, 147). The text, therefore, is released from any 'authorized' meaning previously thought to come from its 'creator' and becomes plural. The text makes its intertexts dance, reconfiguring them in a new context and inviting readers to envision new steps for the future in Orla's final dance. The dance is about crossing and occupying borders previously thought to be impenetrable. The dance, described as 'a metaphor for the life of the parish', is a social choreography, a performance and articulation of cultural memories, which provides Orla with a way to deal with the past and move to an exciting future (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 48). Her meeting with her Aunt Annie and performance of traditional Irish dancing allows Orla and the reader to symbolically come to terms with past traditions and history, to question and reconfigure them and previous interpretations of them. In

the space of the dance it is realised that the past can be read and rewritten and that subjectivity need not be stable but may be multiple.

Orla's earlier rejection of 'Orla from Tubber' in favour of 'Orla from Dublin' can be read as a reflection of the burgeoning desire of Irish women to break free of their outdated and false idealization as representatives of the state, figured in texts such as *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. In her dance, however, the text invites the modern reader to consider that the past and traditions need not be entirely discarded in achieving 'liberation' in a modernizing country; rather, they might be investigated, deemed to be culturally constructed, reconfigured and subverted for positive ends. Orla's dance generates a reconsideration of those aspects of 'traditional' Irish culture which are conventionally considered to be regressive; it demonstrates respect for tradition as well as movement—movement toward the future.

The history of Irish dance itself is intercultural and intertextual. It is believed that the Druids performed dances in rings as part of pagan worshipping rituals and the arrival of the Celts with their form of folk dancing altered this slightly. This was further influenced and modified by the style of the Normans' round dance in the twelfth century. From this point onwards, the repertoire of Irish dances continued to change and develop, embodying 'the creative interplay between indigenous and exogenous forms, resulting in popular hybrids like the "sets" and "reels" (an Irish adaptation of the continental "quadrille")' (Whelan 2005, 143). In pre-famine times these were danced at cross-roads and at informal gatherings in houses, and were popularised and spread by itinerant dancing masters, who 'customised these new forms, translating them into a popular idiom and then propagated them in their newly standardised forms through their itinerant teaching circuit' (Whelan 2005, 143).

Dance, then, not only enacted movement but was transported and taught around different locations, whilst also being occasionally changed in form and style. By the end

of the nineteenth century, Irish dance was to encounter considerable changes and to take on a more official status, due to two powerful bodies: the Gaelic League and the Catholic Church. The Gaelic League, formed in 1893 to promote Irish culture was responsible for reviving an interest in Irish dance and arranged the first *céilí* in London in 1897. The League tried to refine and standardize Irish dance by rejecting those elements considered foreign to it, constructing a 'pure' version of Irishness.[69] Set-dancing, thought to have developed from the French Quadrilles, was banned by the league because of its 'foreign' origins.[70] At the final *céilí*, the students, we are told, dance 'The Walls of Limerick', 'The Siege of Ennis', 'The Little Cape of Clonard', 'The Fairy Reel' and 'The Couples Jig', all dances invented or standardised by the Gaelic League (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 234-235). The simplified and regimented form of the dances is evident in the description of their performance: 'the music breaks out, the room is filled with ripe, mellow sounds. The boys move *en masse* to the girls. [...] The couples, trained now like the Kirov Ballet, take up their positions. [...] Over to the right side, over to the left side. Take your partner and on you go' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 234-235). The steps taken are rehearsed, formalised and enacted after a time of being trained like professional dancers. Such dances were invented by the Gaelic League because they allowed large numbers of dancers to traverse the whole floor, similar to the traditional balls held in Britain at the turn of the century. Traditional Irish dance, which valued the ability to 'dance on a sixpence' in restricted domestic spaces, was therefore altered to suit displays in larger and more formal settings (Whelan 2005, 144).

These modified dance styles and transition to new hall-based settings were not only promoted by the Gaelic League, but were also encouraged and advocated by the

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[69] The Gaelic League, influenced by an old dancing master from Munster, developed criteria of Irish dance that were Munster-based, and rejected styles of dance from other Irish provinces such as the 'Highlanders' and 'Flings' of Donegal and the *sean-nós* style of dancing from Connemara, which allowed freedom of arm movements. *The Handbook of Irish Dances*, published in 1902, led to standardization of *céilí* dances. In 1929 the Gaelic League founded the Irish Dancing Commission to enforce Irish dancing rules and govern competitions. For an extended discussion of Irish dance see Whelan (2005).

[70] Ironically, the League rejected set-dancing 'in favour of their own Scottish-influenced inventions' (O'Laoire 2005, 276).

Catholic Church in Ireland from the early twentieth century. Traditional Irish dance, held at cross-roads, in kitchens and other limited domestic spaces, was deeply disapproved of by the clergy, who saw it as taking place in dangerous arenas where unregulated close encounters between men and women could occur (Whelan 2005, 143). The clergy, publicly claiming to be concerned by the unsanitary conditions in these settings, but privately alarmed by the potential for sexual misconduct such arenas might provide, set about shifting Irish dance from its traditional settings. The Dance Hall Act of 1935, enacted by the Irish government under presumed influence and pressure from the Catholic Church, solidified the prohibition of house- and crossroad-dances, and ensured that anyone partaking in such activities would be arrested and fined.[71] The parochial halls built by the clergy in the 1930s and 1940s were to be the new locations where traditional music and dance could be performed under the watchful eye of the clergy. The public setting and increased space resulting from this relocation of dance to hall-based arenas allowed for better surveillance and, consequently, less likelihood of unsupervised bodily contact between the sexes. Such restrictive and official moves on traditional dancing culture soon dampened any spontaneity or enthusiasm for its enactment, as well as making it more difficult to perform.

Orla's final *céilí* dance, though, in its exuberant dizziness, challenges the very origins of hall-based *céilí* dances as restrictive places for dancing, in which the church tried to control the expressions of a population. Although bound to dance the steps as she has been taught them, Orla also changes perceptions of those steps by the way she dances them, working within and against them. The final dance described involves fewer rules and more excitement, exuberance and spontaneity than the standardized forms danced before. When *Baint an Fhéir* starts, the energy increases and patterns unravel:

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[71] The Government expressed concerns that money made at these dances might be used to fund illegal organisations, but would probably never have enacted such a law without pressure from the Catholic clergy.

It's everyone's favourite, the best of all the dances, the fastest footwork, the wildest swings. [....] The couples swing. Whirlpools, storms, propellers spinning. The schoolhouse is hot with human electricity. The feet thump, the ponytails fly, the blood races. The music accelerates, faster and faster fiddles the fiddler, faster and faster pleats the melodeon. Feet are tapping and ears are reddening and hearts are thumping. (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 235)

This dance is at odds with the refinement of Irish dance by the Gaelic League, who simplified the stepping style 'to eliminate the vulgar batter (seen as English clog dancing in disguise) and to curtail flamboyance (as in the theatrical arm-flailing of the Connemara style)' (Whelan 2005, 144). The fast footwork and wild swings here are reminiscent of the pre-Famine style of dance, where 'there was also sexual theatre— expressed through the heavier "hit" of the male dancer (culminating in the "batter", heavy rhythmic drumming with the full foot), counterpoised against the quicker, buoyant step of the female performer' (Whelan 2005, 143). *Baint an Fhéir* has 'the fastest footwork, the wildest swings' because it is danced to a quickened pace of music, a style that was discouraged when the new canon of dance was formed by the Gaelic League (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 235). Orla's dance negotiates steps around the Cultural Revival's constructed version of Irishness, as well as the Catholic Church's restriction of physical demonstrations. At the final *céilí* dance everything comes together in a cycle of movement; subjectivity is constantly moving, dancing, continually in process. In the dance, then, Orla steps *beyond* the ideology her mother has inherited and finds not one 'place', but multiple positions to occupy.

This dance recalls the central scene of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which portrays four sisters in rural 1930s Ireland dancing wildly and spontaneously, implicitly celebrating a conscious subversion of the sense of order previously palpable in their Catholic household. Order is collapsed in their dance and Christian, or Catholic values

opposed in their steps. The sisters dance to Irish music, played by a *céilí* band on their radio; at first their movements are '*almost recognizable*' and seem to adhere to the pattern of a familiar Irish dance, but soon their '*weave of complex steps*' become '*simultaneously controlled and frantic*', promoting '*a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced*' (Friel 1990, 22). If only for a few moments, their dance resists restrictive discourses. The music stops, though, and soon after, the sisters retreat to their domestic chores, feeling '*slightly ashamed and slightly defiant*' (Friel 1990, 22). The thrill that Orla and the reader experience in the final *céilí* dance goes one step further than this; the excitement felt by Orla is not dissipated at the end of the chapter— the point at which she might stop dancing is not described—implying that the dance might metaphorically continue, long after the *céilí* has ended.

The description of Orla's final dance also calls to mind the title of the novel, which has Yeatsian resonances; it is 'the spinner spinning, the boatman sailing, the fellow fishing, the fire flaming. It's the dancers dancing' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 235-236). This echoes Yeats's poem 'Among School Children', which asks, in its final line, 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' (1962, 130). Whereas in Yeats's poem the final stanza is used to describe an imaginary, ideal state where mind and body are united, *The Dancers Dancing* succeeds in representing such a vision to the reader; in the final dance we cannot separate the dancer from the dance: the teenagers' thoughts and their actions are converged in joyous energy. Furthermore, the text takes an additional step from Yeats's poem by envisioning the dancer and the dance not in a mystical, romantic fashion, but in an everyday setting in a changing Ireland. It reacts implicitly to Yeats's abstract theorizing of Ireland and idealization of femininity as a model for Ireland's future. The text subverts his regular use of the figure of the dancer, using it not to suggest a set model to aspire to, but to refute the notion of an ideal model of Ireland

or its subjects, who might now embrace multifarious subjectivity and see the national identity as constructed in culture.

Even for a reader unfamiliar with Irish dance or its history, the difference between the *céilí* dances is signalled by the final dance name's inscription in the Irish language. *Baint an Fhéir* translates to 'Making the Hay' and is also known as 'The Haymakers Jig', recalling pre-famine traditions and dancing at the cross-roads. This is not to designate this dance as a 'pure' form of Irish tradition, but it is an interesting choice here because it was not promoted by the Gaelic League as fervently as dances such as 'The Walls of Limerick' or 'The Siege of Ennis'. Orla's dance at the *céilí* may allow her to embrace her Irish culture and family's rural roots, but can also be read as a temporary relief from these pressures, because, ironically, the dance she performs is not purely Irish, but, like nationality itself, is a culturally-constructed tradition. The *céilí* is one part of the narrative of Irish identity, and its twentieth-century connotations of restrictiveness and control are subverted in a forum where excitement and bodily freedom can be enacted and sexuality expressed.

To dance is to exist between realms, to occupy the interstices. In the novel, dance takes place in two contrasting areas: the schoolhouse and the local dancehalls. The *Gaeltacht* scholars attend the *céilí* at the schoolhouse where attendance is compulsory and 'all the formalities that have been dispensed with in the dance halls of Ireland are firmly enacted, even enforced' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 47). Every student is obliged to accept if asked to dance: 'nobody, not the shyest boy or the ugliest girl, sits out a single dance' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 48). The *céilí* in the schoolhouse, in contrast to the ballroom dances Sava attends, does not exclude anyone from participating, allowing for contact between people and a renegotiation of their identities.

Prohibiting displays of sexuality, Irish dance in its new form and location after 1935 increasingly appealed mostly to 'pre-pubescent children', because 'the invented

dance style was purposely asexual, involving minimal physical contact, as opposed to the full-blooded, full-frontal engagement of, for example, the traditional sets' (Whelan 2005, 145). *The Dancers Dancing* not only revitalizes the old and new forms of *céilí* dancing, but resexualises the dances, offering them for reconsideration as spaces of temporary liberation and excitement rather than restraint. Indeed, it is during *Baint an Fhéir* that Micheál makes advances on Orla, much to her delight. He is described in physical terms: 'Orla sees him, everyone sees him. He is dressed in his white shirt and blue jeans. His hair springs from his head in a dark crest' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 235). After he asks her to dance, 'Micheál smiles across at Orla and she smiles back. The music strikes up. The dance begins' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 235). The dance does not only appeal to 'pre-pubescent' children here, but to young teenagers expressing sexual curiosity, thus challenging the church's prohibition of crossing all sorts of borders during dances, including physical ones. This dance gestures towards a dissolution of Western metaphysical thought, which operates in dichotomous terms; in it 'the edges of things blur and terms such as mind/body, flesh/spirit, carnal/divine, male/female become labile and unmoored, breaking loose from the fixity of their pairings' (Dempster 1995, 35). This experience may only be felt fleetingly, but nevertheless offers this deconstructive step for consideration.

The dance, as noted in 'Choreographies', only takes place because of the constant variations in 'rhythm' *between* the sexes. In the 'spaces between' binary sexual difference there may be a space empty of metaphysical duality. This notion of dreaming of a 'general deformation of logic' is suggested to the reader while Orla sleeps:

Can you dream what you do not know? Usually the stories that unfold in Orla's head while she sleeps are mixed-up images that she recognises from the life she lives during the day, from stories she has read or heard or seen. She sees words,

printed or written, people, places, moving through narratives that her sleeping

self invents. But the people, the places, the words, come from where she has

been when awake. Can it only be like that? (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 210)

This final rhetorical question invites the reader to dream otherwise, a notion also

explored in 'Choreographies'. In this interview, Derrida refers to his essay, '*Geschlecht*:

Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference', in which he draws attention to Heidegger's

brief insistence on the neutrality of *Dasein*, which is beyond or precedes sexual

difference. Inherently problematic in Heidegger's thesis is his subordination of sexual

difference to ontological difference. Derrida suggests that the sexual neutrality of

Dasein does not designate the absence of sexuality, but the absence of duality, or 'any

mark belonging to one of the two sexes' (Derrida 1988, 180). Derrida elaborates

Heidegger's thesis by noting that he implies only the neutralization of *binary* sexual

difference. A complete neutralization of sexual difference would leave in place an

unmarked masculine privilege, as in the cases of Hegel and Levinas, who gave a

'masculine sexual marking to what is presented [...] as a neutral originariness' (Derrida

1988, 178).

Derrida 'opens the possibility, beyond Heidegger's explicit statements, of a

thought of sexual *differences* irreducible to the classical binary couple' (Bennington

1993, 224). An alternative to understanding sexuality in terms of binary difference is

conceived in the proposal of a sexuality removed from duality, from which the very

foundations that have posited women as secondary might be interrogated. This double

dissymmetry would go beyond the known or coded marks of sexuality and is an

'excessiveness' where the relationship to the other 'would not be a-sexual, far from it,

but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference' (Derrida 1988, 184). At

the close of the interview Derrida offers his 'dream' or wish for the necessary but

impossible 'multiplicity of sexually marked voices' (Derrida 1988, 184). This is a

dream of the innumerable, of 'a sexuality without number', that is, of a sexuality that is

not predicated on a binary opposition in which the masculine term derives its 'firstness'

from allocating the feminine term a 'secondariness'. In this dream the feminine is also

denied 'firstness', because innumerable sexuality is not based on a notion of binary

opposition, but a plurality of voices.

Derrida notes that 'it is not impossible that desire for a sexuality without number

can still protect us, like a dream, from an implacable destiny which immures everything

for life in the figure 2' (Derrida 1988, 184). This 'figure 2' is the foundation of Western

Metaphysical thought, based on privileging presence over absence. Geoffrey

Bennington notes: 'By thinking the second moment as derived with respect to the first,

one returns, if only in thought, the complex to the simple, the secondary to the primary,

the contingent to the necessary. This is the very order of reason and meaning, of the

logos' (1993, 18). Although this logic cannot be entirely escaped, it can be challenged.

Sexuality might be thought of as multiplicity without duality – not a pluralisation

through multiplication, but rather through division and dissemination without return.

Nancy K. Miller, in a chapter called 'Dreaming Dancing', finds fault with this dream,

describing it as 'degendered' (1991, 78). Miller notes that although the dream of the

innumerable may suggest a dance of playful possibilities, it nevertheless

decontextualises sexual difference and 'paper[s] over [...] both the institutional and

political differences between men and women and the equally powerful social and

cultural differences between women' (1991, 80). Miller sees Derrida's dream as

escaping social materiality and locatedness and as lacking attentiveness to experience.

She argues that in Derrida's dream of the innumerable 'the subjects of the dance [...]

perform outside any recognizable frame of reference; they pirouette beyond all local

contingencies of history and place' (1991, 88-89). *The Dancers Dancing*, I would argue,

shows this not to be the case: Orla's dance is clearly grounded in history, but allows for

a reconsideration of this history as well as a dream of sexuality beyond binary oppositions. A more 'realistic' alternative to this dream of a time or situation where sexual difference might no longer be thought of in binary terms, perhaps, is to 'learn to love instead of dreaming of the innumerable' (Derrida 1988, 184). However, Derrida enquires whether the dream itself does not testify to the fact that what is dreamt must exist in order for the dream to take place? This is a necessary longing for something that was never lost because it never existed, *and yet* must be invented, and is played out by the dancer, whose desire is 'to invent incalculable choreographies' (Derrida 1988, 185). This dream might allow us to consider a vision 'where the fact of being born male or female no longer would determine the subject's position in relation to power, and where, therefore, the very nature of power itself would be transformed' (Moi 2002, 171).[72]

This dream is anticipated by Kristeva in 'Women's Time', which expresses the hope that we might one day see the dichotomy between male and female, masculine and feminine as a constraint which is culturally constructed. Kristeva suggests that a third phase of feminism might spring from what she defines as two initial stages. The first was characterised by the objective of gaining a place in linear history by attaining equality with men; although this initial stage of the women's movement resulted in numerous benefits for women, it nevertheless globalized the problems of different women under the label 'Universal Woman' and entailed a rejection of 'the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal insofar as they are deemed incompatible with insertion in that history' (Kristeva 1981b, 18-19). The second phase, 'after May 1968', involves a rejection of being located in linear temporality and the construction of a counter-society; the focus here on sexual difference instead of equality risks,

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[72] For similarly positive readings of 'Choreographies' to Moi's, see Suileman (1986) and Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell (1987) who suggest that though Derrida's dream of incalculable choreographies may be impossible, it still has suggestive power, and might encourage us to cease thinking of gender in terms of duality and hierarchy.

according to Kristeva, both becoming a kind of inverted sexism and perpetuating the

mythologies of 'woman' and motherhood. The third generation of women, she suggests,

might acknowledge both of these approaches but also challenge the very notion of

identity itself. In this third phase 'the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition

between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*' (1981b,

33).[73] Orla's dance not only invites the reader to consider this notion of a sexuality

without number, but also gestures towards this third phase of feminism, which would

interrogate many other binary oppositions.

Where was Irish feminism to go in 1972? In the 1970s, feminist concerns were

set against nationalist ones, and women were eager to step out from the shadow of

Cathleen Ní Houlihan, The Celtic Revival, and Eamon De Valera's Constitution. Orla

has inherited a gendered nation based on binary oppositions where traditional Irish

culture and language represent all those things that seemed to have limited women's

positions:

> feminism and an interest in Irish appeared to be mutually exclusive. The
>
> majority of the women doing such exciting work in challenging the authoritarian
>
> structures of our society didn't want to know about Irish. They associated it with
>
> the most repressive and fatalistic aspects of our culture. Almost axiomatically,
>
> the *Gaeltacht*, so often invoked by patriarchal nationalists, symbolized all the
>
> forces that had kept women subservient to men. (Bourke 1997, 304-305)

The Dancers Dancing addresses the past intertextually and rewrites an option for Irish

women. The in-between spaces in the dance provide an opportunity for healing the

divided self that feels it has to choose between languages, histories, and subject

positions. The text questions the past and rewrites it for a better future; challenging the

ideologies represented by Elizabeth and Auntie Annie allows for the past to be imagined

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[73] Kristeva specifies that her 'usage of the word "generation" implies less a chronology than a signifying space, a both corporeal and desiring mental space' (1981b, 33).

differently and a new future to be envisioned. Instead of adhering to and working from

an inheritance received in a teleological manner, Orla and the reader are encouraged to

rethink it. As Derrida explains in *Specters of Marx,* an inherited political program must

be interrogated:

> An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its
>
> presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction* to *reaffirm by*
>
> *choosing.* 'One must' means *one must* filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out
>
> several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. (1994, 16)

Political responsibility, therefore, involves *actively* receiving an inheritance. In order to

truly inherit a feminist legacy, one must respect it to the point of questioning those who

claim to adhere to it and find in it things that have not yet been seen: 'inheritance is

never a *given*, it is always a task' (Derrida 1994, 54). To entrust the future of feminism

to an 'original' matrix or 'theatre, upon which the progress of feminist struggles is

staged' is actually to abuse that inheritance. The basis of feminism is often seen as a

struggle for 'liberation' through progress 'commanded by an unthinkable *telos*, a truth

of sexual difference and femininity etc.' (Derrida 1988, 165). This is a dogmatic form of

consensus, according to Derrida, because it cannot truly 'progress' if it remains caught

in 'the age-old dream of reappropriation, "liberation", autonomy, mastery, in short the

cortège of metaphysics and the *tekhnè*' (Derrida 1988, 166). An alternative to this

dogmatism lies in 'different "feminisms"' that are already in place but have often been

silenced (Derrida 1988, 165). Orla occupies new positions characterised by hybridity,

flexibility and plurality. Having become aware of the restrictions placed on her, her

newly formed consciousness allows her to constantly shift positions and prevents her

from being unified or totalised into one stable identity. Her final dance takes place in a

liminal space between known patterns and those yet to be imagined; it embodies and

articulates cultural memories whilst dancing into the future.

'Closure'

The final chapter of *The Dancers Dancing* is told in the first person by Orla, and

functions as a kind of epilogue, as she shares some details of her life after Tubber. She

has reached a point where she has found her own voice, but not one 'owned' by her:

rather, it is an interweaving of different stories, different discourses. The fact that she

speaks partly as a mother challenges the Catholic Church and Celtic Revival's

idealisation of motherhood and silencing of real mother's voices. Alongside this

repudiation of restrictive ideologies, though, the reader is told that other traditions have

not died out; she holidays in the *Gaeltacht*, where, years after her time in Tubber, the

Irish language is prospering: 'there is a radio station, and people have started to agitate

for an Irish television channel' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 239). Irish national traditions are

once again shown to be culturally constructed from the 'scraps, patches and rags of

everyday life', when we hear that the area has a heritage centre which commemorates

local writers in 'videos, photographs, wall hangings, snatches of music' (Ní Dhuibhne

1999, 239). Orla's maturity and increased self-assurance as a woman in modern Ireland,

juxtaposed with this setting in which Irish traditions are validated and enjoyed (even if

denaturalized), invites the reader to consider a feminist future in Ireland in which

women and nationhood might not be antithetical.

There is no sense of closure in this chapter, no point at which the text becomes

fully intelligible to the reader, and no blueprint for a feminist future is offered; only

questions are posed. Micheál passes through Orla's life once again—flits through

without a chance for her to talk to him, to 'know' his story. Similarly, a fragment of

Orla's life has been offered to the reader during her time in the *Gaeltacht*, but she, like

Micheál, cannot be 'known', categorised or granted a coherent identity. As previously

noted, it is clear from the beginnings of the text that order will not be established at the

end; rather, the story will be 'clear as muddy old mud' (Ní Dhuibhne 1999, 3). The fact

that there are more questions than answers throughout the text invites readers to respond

to what is presented.

The text once again eschews realist conventions of enigma and closure by

briefly imparting details about a romance that took place between Orla and Micheál the

year after she left Tubber. The relationship, which was hinted at throughout the text, is

given only a small stage it turns out, and, in contrast to traditional romance narratives,

does not last or end in happy-ever-afters. The reader is not absorbed into a comfortable

fictional world with a perfect, classical ending. This chapter, in which Orla lists her

relationships and reminisces about Micheál, also constitutes a very private ending to the

text. The question of developing a feminist future out of a tangled mess of nationalist

narratives is posed once again here, and the private and personal are shown not to

constitute a retreat from history and politics, but to be deeply embedded in them.

The text's lack of closure is helpful in imagining a new kind of feminism in

Ireland. Instead of marginalizing and excluding competing voices and positions in an

effort to close the text, the final chapter does not offer readers a clear-cut position or try

to map a univocal Irish feminism; rather, it invites them to participate in imagining

ways to invent the future they would prefer. After all, 'reading does not consist in

stopping the chain of systems, in establishing a truth, [...] it consists in coupling these

systems, not according to their finite quality, but according to their plurality' (Barthes

1990, 11). Literature affects the subject and can therefore offer a chance for political

critique; texts cannot be thought of as separate from reality when it is in language that

meanings are formed—the meanings and values that we live our lives by. 'Real' women

are the effects of discursive practices; a separation of practical politics from textuality,

or empirical from non-empirical, is unfeasible because each term invades the other. The

text's inclusion of intertexts and its dances with them invites the reader to interrogate

and alter dominant discourses and thus to critically and productively consider the future.

Chapter Two: Sexing the Cherry

Sexing the Cherry breaks off one third of the way through to accommodate 'The Story

of the Twelve Dancing Princesses'. The eldest of the princesses tells Jordan their story:

> You know that eventually a clever prince caught us flying through the window.
>
> We had given him a sleeping draught but he only pretended to drink it. He had
>
> eleven brothers and we were all given in marriage, one to each brother, and as it
>
> says lived happily ever after. We did, but not with our husbands. (Winterson
>
> 1990, 48)

The best known version of the tale is that which was first put into writing by Jacob and

Wilhelm Grimm in the early nineteenth century, but *Sexing the Cherry* recounts it in a

new and subversive way. The Grimms' version tells of twelve princesses who escape

their locked room each night to dance in a magical underground world with twelve

princes. Their father, perplexed by the worn-out state of their shoes, offers the hand of

one of his daughters to any man who can solve the mystery of where they disappear to

at night. After several failed attempts by various princes, who are consequently put to

death, a wounded soldier discovers the reason why the princesses' shoes are danced to

pieces. Following advice from an old woman to avoid the drugged food and drink

offered by the princesses, and donning an invisibility cloak, he follows them on their

nocturnal adventures three times. On the fourth day he divulges their secret to the king

and, as a reward, chooses to marry the eldest daughter and is made heir to the throne.

Sexing the Cherry's retelling of this story both relies upon and departs from the

Grimms' version of the tale, blending aspects of it with new and different stories, and

putting forward an alternative ending to the traditional one. This feminist rewriting of

the tale defies notions of originality and authority, denaturalizing the ideology of

traditional fairy tales and dancing new steps away from them. Just as *The Dancers*

Dancing is generated as a feminist response to Enid Blyton's school stories, sources of conventional images of girlhood, *Sexing the Cherry* invokes and redefines fairy tales, which validate traditional femininity. Here the most significant change made to the tale, for any reader, is that what happened *after* the princesses were married is accounted for. The princesses tell Jordan, their visitor, of how all but one of them left, lost, or murdered their husbands and came together to live in the same house. This unexpected turn is at odds with traditional fairy tales, which usually end with accounts of happy matrimony. However, *Sexing the Cherry* does not simply tell what happened after the ending of the 'original' tale by the Grimms; the princesses' self-conscious re-tellings also alter details of the 'original' itself, in which only one princess was married. The eldest Princess recapitulates the details of the traditional story for Jordan:

> We all slept in the same room, my sisters and I. [...] We slept in white beds with white sheets and the moon shone through the window and made white shadows on the floor. From this room, every night, we flew to a silver city where no one ate or drank. The occupation of the people was to dance. (Winterson 1990, 48)

In the Grimms' version, the princesses descend to an underground castle through a trap-door, where twelve princes wait in twelve little boats to row them across a lake to a castle. In this new account, though, they fly through the window of their father's house; their ascent rather than descent signifies that their desire for freedom has been changed from a secret underground activity to an open, unashamed and upward flight.

In *Sexing the Cherry* there is no traditional castle with refreshments where 'each prince danced with his princess', but rather a city where everybody dances, enacting a move away from dancing's traditional purpose of partnering men and women together (Grimm 1968, 5). Dancing is no longer a match-making activity, but one that signifies joyous heterogeneity. In the Grimms' tale an ex-soldier uncovers the princesses' secret and chooses to marry the eldest, but in *Sexing the Cherry*, the mystery is solved by a

prince with eleven brothers, who are *all* promised the hand of a princess in marriage. In Winterson's retelling it is the youngest Princess, Fortunata, rather than the eldest, who is chosen as a wife by the prince who exposes their activities.[74] Significantly, he is eventually the only brother left without a bride, as 'she flew from the altar like a bird from a snare'; she escaped the wedding before the nuptials took place, symbolically avenging the prince for his part in revealing the women's secret (Winterson 1990, 60).[75] *Sexing the Cherry* gestures towards Bruno Bettelheim's reading of fairy tales as strategies for wish-fulfilment, in which outcast figures like ex-soldiers return to society and ordinary folk see one of their own become a king. The text hijacks this idea by offering itself to be read as an inscription of feminist wishes, suggesting that the princesses and readers might construct worlds which fulfil *their* desires

Sexing the Cherry's retelling of the tale focuses on how traditional fairy tales end with matrimony. Of course, this ending to fairy tales is apparent in many traditions; fairy tales are forerunners of romantic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Austen's and the Brontës', in which marriage usually completes the narratives. The idea that a realist story reaches its natural conclusion in the pairing off of characters and the assumption that marriage equates to happiness is questioned here. The 'happy ending' in *Sexing the Cherry* ultimately consists of life outside of marriage, and the critique of matrimony is enhanced by the changes made to the eldest princess's retelling of the ending of the 'original'. In the Grimms' tale the eldest princess is consigned to marriage, and all twelve princesses are forbidden from taking steps away from their father's authority. This story tells of the ultimate downfall that will come upon those daughters who disobey their father, especially those who escape his house to dance, to

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[74] Any reference made to Winterson in this chapter is not to grant authority to the figure of the author, but to denote which version of the tale is being referred to.

[75] It is also worth noting that the Grimms' version portrays the eldest princess as naïve and flighty; she constantly ignores the pleas of the youngest princess that something is amiss during their secret trip to the castle. In *Sexing the Cherry*, the eldest Princess recapitulates the tale for Jordan in her own terms and is characterized as a stronger person (Winterson 1990, 48).

experience liberty and pleasure. In punishment, they are forbidden access to the freedom

and excitement they had enjoyed: the eldest princess must marry the soldier, and the

underground princes are 'awarded punishment for as many days as they had danced by

night with the princesses' (Grimm 1968, 6). In *Sexing the Cherry*, it is as if an extra

punishment is meted out to the sisters: all of them must marry a brother of the prince

who disclosed their secret. In both stories, the princesses are the property of their father;

they are his to give away in marriage as he sees fit. Although in the Grimms' story, the

princesses are punished for disobeying their father, the traditional reader is invited to

dream that they might have found true happiness with their dancing princes, if only they

had followed their father's law. In the 'original' tale of the princesses, a happy ending

might have consisted in the princesses marrying the twelve princes they danced with in

the underground castle. Marriage, then, in the Grimms' story, equates to happiness, just

as dancing does, but only if that dance is with a prospective husband, sanctioned by a

father's approval. In the Grimms' tale, then, the princesses' punishment for dancing is

the denial of the possibility of 'true happiness', which, we are invited to think, may

ultimately reside in marriage to the underground princes. *Sexing the Cherry* cleverly

omits this possibility by altering the retelling of the original tale and presenting

marriage as enforced entrapment.

Familiar Patterns Re-choreographed

Although these significant changes have been made to the Grimms' tale, not every one

of them will be apparent to all readers. The feminist perspective of *Sexing the Cherry*'s

new tale is still obvious, though; its focus on life after marriage, as well as its departure

from the structure and language of traditional fairy tales, presents an obvious disparity

to any reader familiar with the genre. 'The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses'

may not be as well-known as 'Snow White', or 'Cinderella', for example, but its formula is, nevertheless, embedded in cultural consciousness. The novel plays with this particular tale as well as with the tropes, characterisation, and typical 'happy endings' of traditional tales. The changes made are explicit: princesses killing their husbands or living with female lovers is a clear departure from, and subversion of, the plots of conventional tales. Familiarity with the genre and expectations of it make these changes obvious, and invite readers to respond to them in certain ways.

The availability of fairy tales in culture is even alluded to in the story; when Jordan meets the miller, he is asked if he 'knew the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses. [He] said [he] had heard it' (Winterson 1990, 43). The text conflates many stories: the 'original tale' of the princesses, the stories they relate to Jordan, and the story of Jordan meeting with them. It constructs a labyrinthine frame, more complex and self-conscious than that of conventional fairy tales. The eldest princess's presumption that Jordan must already 'know that eventually a clever prince caught us flying through the window' not only alerts the reader to the familiarity of the genre, but 'you know' also hints at its somewhat predictable structure (Winterson 1990, 48). The reader, even if unfamiliar with this particular story, is prepared to encounter generic princesses, a happy ending, a simple framework with a moral lesson, and perhaps the punishment of villains and reward of persecuted heroines. Less than half-way through the narrative of the eldest princess, the reader becomes aware of the whole range of conventions and attitudes that are being called upon. Indeed, Jonathan Culler notes that even a sentence such as 'once upon a time there lived a king who had a daughter' is a very 'powerful intertextual operator'. It is

> extremely rich in literary and pragmatic presuppositions. It relates the story to a
>
> series of other stories, identifies it with the conventions of a genre, asks us to
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> take certain attitudes towards it (guaranteeing, or at least strongly implying, that

the story will have a point to it, a moral which will govern the organization of

detail and incident). (1981, 115)

The reader, then, as a locus of discursive knowledge, has certain expectations of the

text. Readers share an 'intersubjective body of knowledge' with writers, who cannot

avoid 'postulating general expectations, implicit and explicit knowledge which makes

[their] discourse intelligible' (Culler 1981, 101). Readers' familiarity with the genre and

their 'general expectations' from it are crucial here if they are to recognise the

significance of *Sexing the Cherry*'s retelling. The princesses' stories mean by nature of

what they are not and readers are invited to note the differences between them and the

tale as it is traditionally conceived. *Sexing the Cherry's* inclusion of such a familiar

genre grants readers a certain delight and triumph in recognising it and makes it

readable. A completely new and radical text might have less potential to engage readers

in thinking about social change. Although the 'authority' of the fairy tale genre allows

the text to gain readers' trust and makes an impact, this retelling does not conform to

what readers might anticipate; expectations are joyously thwarted in this postmodern

revision, which throws the traditional reader into crisis.

The tale of the eldest princess offers an unexpected reconfiguration not only of

the Grimms' tale, but also of Hans Christian Andersen's well-known story of 'The Little

Mermaid'. In this tale within a tale, the princess recalls how she fell in love with a

mermaid and came to live with her in a well beside her sisters' house: 'I fell in love with

her at once, and after a few months of illicit meetings, my husband complaining all the

time that I stank of fish, I ran away and began housekeeping with her in perfect salty

bliss' (Winterson 1990, 48). Contrary to regular fairy tale etiquette, the princess not

only ran away from her husband, but also left him for a woman, and a mermaid at that.

In 'The Little Mermaid' a mermaid leaves her home in the ocean to come to dry land in

search of immortality.[76] Her destiny depends on a prince, who must fall in love with and

marry her if she is to attain an immortal soul. The moral of the story is one of feminine

duty, perseverance, suffering, and self-denial. Andersen's mermaid sacrifices her voice

to become human and refuses to kill the prince in exchange for the return of her

mermaid body, preferring to lose her own life: 'the story's chilling message is that

cutting out your tongue is still not enough. To be saved, more is required: self-

obliteration, dissolution' (Warner 1994, 398). In this retelling, though, it is not the

mermaid who makes sacrifices, but the princess, who leaves her home on dry land to

live in a well with her lover. Although Andersen's tale does not allow the mermaid a

happy ending in matrimony, it nevertheless promotes feminine self-sacrifice, rewarding

her with spiritual fulfilment and a second chance of immortality at the end. At odds with

her typical representation, in which she is a delicate, silent, refined and suffering

creature, the mermaid snatches Jordan's gift of herring from him: 'Already the

mermaid, who was very beautiful but without fine graces, was gobbling the fish,

dropping them back into her throat the way you or I would an oyster' (Winterson 1990,

47). There is no indication that the mermaid cannot speak; there is 'a sound of great

delight' when she opens the parcel of fish, and the reader is given the impression that

she is not bereft of vocal powers, but is simply too busy to speak on this occasion.

Rather than engaging in self-punishment and self-denial, the mermaid greedily gobbles

Jordan's gift and lives unashamedly with her lover.

The tale 'is intelligible only in terms of a prior body of discourse—other projects

and thoughts which it implicitly or explicitly takes up, prolongs, cites, refutes,

transforms' (Culler 1981, 101). In this anecdote, the traditional image of the mermaid,

as it is known in Andersen's fairy tale, is 'refuted' and 'transformed'. The mermaid is

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[76] 'The Little Mermaid', like 'The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', has multiple origins. Marina Warner notes that 'Andersen elaborated his disturbing story in 1836-7, from varied strands of oral and written tales in Eastern as well as Western tradition, about undines and selkies, nixies, Loreleis and Mélusines, in which the fairy creature appears on earth and stays with a mortal as his bride only on certain conditions' (1994, 396).

not merely changed from a self-sacrificing figure into a lively, greedy one, but becomes

an ambiguous figure in the text's citations of the popular Western depiction of

mermaids. The eldest princess fell in love with the mermaid when she encountered her

combing her hair in a coral cave, an image which calls to mind the tempting and

dangerous mermaids as depicted in Homer's *Odyssey*. Homer's sirens are alluring,

seductive temptresses, hostile and dangerous to men, whom they try to lure to their

death by singing. Winterson's mermaid is neither Andersen's nor Homer's, but a

passionate lesbian lover. The text, then, does not simply invert the characteristics of

Andersen's mermaid, but blends these changes with contrasting images in other

intertexts, presenting us with an ambiguous, destabilised figure. The clash of discourses

throws the traditional reader into crisis, with the potential to disturb fixed traditions,

values and assumptions.

The text, then, invites readers not only to recognise references, but also to

identify what changes have been made to them. The tales of the second and third

princesses begin with quotations; the reader can take delight in recognising them, but is

encouraged to criticise the ideologies promoted in the poems they are taken from. The

second princess shows Jordan a painting of her late husband, whom she mummified

when he tried to prevent her from collecting religious curiosities. Her words, 'that's my

last husband painted on the wall [...] looking as though he were alive' constitute a re-

contextualized quotation from Robert Browning's poem *My Last Duchess*, a dramatic

monologue spoken by a Renaissance prince, who collects and controls brides, art and

statues (Winterson 1990, 49). Ironically reworked here, the story ascribes the words to

the wife rather than a prince. The princess makes her husband into part of her collection

of curiosities, just as the Duchess of the title was merely one in a series of wives for the

prince. The husband's mummified body replaces the mummified saint he selfishly

burned, and comes to constitute a product of the hobby he had disapproved of. He is

now seen as a mere item, just as the duchess had appeared to her prince; gazed at in a painting and mummified as part of a collection, he is doubly controlled and objectified. The princess, significantly, takes revenge by suffocating her husband, who had tried to control and metaphorically smother her.

Initially, the princess's pre-meditated murder of her husband may seem merely to constitute an inversion of the sentiments of Browning's poem, but the fairytale setting and the humorous description of the princess's hobby offer a new perspective on the poem without the text being recuperated by its sentiments. The insertion of the quotation from the poem into this new context has the potential to disturb the ideology it promotes, because 'every quotation distorts and redefines the "primary" utterance by relocating it within another linguistic and cultural context' (Worton and Still 1990, 11). The reader is invited to incorporate it into the tale; without it, in fact, the princess's murder of her husband might be interpreted quite differently.

'He walked in beauty', the third princess says of a man she loved, ironically alluding to Lord Byron's Romantic poem 'She Walks in Beauty'. The majority of the third princess's tale depicts her husband in physical terms, imagining him just as Bryon idealizes his muse.[77] At first her lover is described in poetic, romantic terms; metaphors and similes compare his eyes to brown marshes and his lashes to willow trees (Winterson 1990, 50). These natural images recall the Romantic poets' glorification and idealization of nature; soon, though, they become increasingly exaggerated, harsh and sharp rather than peaceful, gentle or sublime: the beloved's shoulder-blades, for example, are 'mountain ranges, his spine a cobbled road' (Winterson 1990, 50). Byron's poem is ironically recontextualised; the reader is distanced from romantic discourse and encouraged to question Romantic poets' unrealistic idealization of women and depiction of them as passive muses. Readers are further encouraged to question this trend in

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[77] It is not disclosed whether her beloved was one of the twelve princes or if he was even her husband, but he is likely to be interpreted as such by the reader.

Romantic poetry by the text's sudden humorous insertion of inopportune expressions into a 'serious' context. The section's initial poetic and refined language, and that of Byron's poem, is contrasted with sentences such as 'his belly was filled with jewels and his cock woke at dawn' (Winterson 1990, 50). This punning reference to genitalia is not expected from a princess and has been totally unforeseen in the context. It is cynically frank and incongruous in the context of the poetic language which precedes it.

The princess's description of her lover's 'beauty' in metaphors and similes reminds the reader that beauty can ever only be defined by comparison. According to Barthes, it is a quality which is always intertextual: 'beauty (unlike ugliness) cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself. [...] In other words, beauty cannot assert itself save in the form of a citation' (1990, 33). The beloved's beauty is referred to a cultural code by means of metaphors and similes, because 'left on its own, deprived of any anterior code, beauty would be mute' (Barthes 1990, 33). The very wealth of descriptions reminds the reader that 'beauty cannot be described (other than by lists and tautologies); it has no referent; yet it does not lack references' (Barthes 1990, 143). The tale also plays with typical fairytale descriptions of heroines, such as Snow White, whose lips were as red as blood and skin was white as snow; it invites the reader to see them as exaggerated and idealized. Even the word 'beauty' to describe a man's appearance points to the way language is bound up in a logic of binary oppositions, where 'beautiful' typically describes women and 'handsome', men. The text re-contextualises and denaturalizes such gendered oppositions. It is the princess's final line 'I still think it was poetic' that throws into relief the absurdity of the murder of the man she apparently loved (Winterson 1990, 50). It invites the reader to consider how murdering for love can be romanticised in literature, and ridicules many traditional fairy tales, which conventionally end with 'poetic justice' and punishment for villainous characters. The

final line serves to set doubts in readers' minds, inviting them to ask if such rough

justice really was 'poetic' and if so, how useful such a concept is.

The quotations from Browning and Byron's poetry in the second and third

princesses' tales invite the reader to approach them ironically. The reader 'inescapably

strives to incorporate the quotation into the unified textuality', and in a comic text

which reconfigures traditional fairy tales, these quotations are incorporated with a

difference (Worton and Still 1990, 11). Indeed, in any new context, a quotation acquires

a new meaning: 'the quotation itself generates a tension between belief both in original

and originating integrity and in the possibility of (re)integration and an awareness of

infinite deferral and dissemination of meaning' (Worton and Still 1990, 11). The

Author's absence from the text is marked in these quotations; their 'original' meanings

are recognised and acknowledged, but are reconfigured in their new deployment. Both

imitated and appropriated, they 'alert the reader to the existence of an already-read, to

intertexts which may or may not be locatable', discouraging a view of the text as

'original' or as having a stable meaning provided by the traditionally conceived Author

(Worton and Still 1990, 10). Chronological history and the notion of a single originating

mind behind the text are undone as quotations represent that which is absent,

interrogating unity and presence, as well as requiring a non-linear reading. According to

Worton and Still, 'to quote is not merely to write glosses on previous writers; it is to

interrogate the chronicity of literature and philosophy, to challenge history as

determining tradition and to question conventional notions of originality and difference'

(1990, 12).

These interrogations are continued in the text's very inclusion of 'The Story of

the Twelve Dancing Princesses'; the fairy tale genre, like the tales of the princesses

which refer to other texts, is without a stable origin. This intertext in *Sexing the Cherry*

cannot be pinned down to one author or one meaning; although the Grimm brothers

transcribed it and their tale has been used as a point of comparison above, theirs is not an 'original' version, but an adaptation of a story transmitted for centuries. The changes *Sexing the Cherry* makes to the 'original' version signal the dissemination and multiple versions of the tale throughout history and its lack of a stable origin.

Oral 'Origins'

The exact sources of fairy tales are impossible to find; these tales cannot be pinned down and dance through time and different tellers. The Grimms' tale of the princesses was not originally composed by the brothers, but was passed down through generations and imparted to them by various acquaintances living in the vicinity of their home. Transcribed some time between 1812 and 1815, it was published in their collection of 'Children's and Household Tales' (*Kinder und Hausmärchen*). Although the princesses' tale can be 'traced' to the Grimm brothers' transcription, then, there is no 'original' version. Indeed, even the title of the story has been changed: the Grimms' story was firstly called 'The Shoes that were Danced to Pieces' ('Die zertanzten Schuhe') but soon became 'The Dancing Shoes' and was then altered to 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' through time and various translations. *Sexing the Cherry* alters the name of the tale once again to 'The *Story* of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', drawing more attention to the princesses' own stories than to their shoes and the mystery surrounding them.

There is no single version of this tale; its origins are multiple and disseminated just as its meaning is unstable and can never be finally pinned down. Although our awareness of the story of the princesses may owe much to the Grimms' transcription of it, it does not belong to them, any more than any author 'owns' or has authority over the meaning of their work. The text is

woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages [...]

antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast

stereophony. [...] The citations which go to make up a text are anonymous,

untraceable, and yet *already read*. (Barthes 1977a, 160)

Fairy tales present a perfect instance of lack of stable origins and authority because of

their oral history; they are nobody's property and change with time. Even the Grimm

brothers refashioned and modified the tales in each of the seven editions they published,

'blurring the distinctions between the oral and literary traditions' as well as 'creating a

uniquely stylized folk tale that has subsequently been termed *Buchmärchen* (book folk

tale) because it is not entirely oral or literary' (Zipes 2000, 369). The 'original' Grimm

tale, then, was already split between oral and written traditions.

Indeed, Marina Warner notes that any quest for authenticity or oral purity is 'a

quest doomed to failure; the material of fairy tale weaves in and out of printed texts, the

Greek romances, *The Arabian Nights*, *Tristan* cycle, or *matière de Bretagne*, the novels

in verse of Chrétien de Troyes, *Mélusine*, saints' lives [....] in the West, oral literature,

has not existed in isolation since Homeric times' (1994, 24). It was only in the early

modern period that fairy tales, told orally for centuries began to be systematically

written down.[78] *Sexing the Cherry* plays with the impossibility of tracing fairy tales

chronologically when the princesses are encountered by Jordan, a seventeenth-century

traveller; although his are travels of the mind, this temporal setting of the story is

nevertheless significant. The princesses tell their tale before it had been transcribed by

the Grimm brothers, though not necessarily before it existed. These tales, orally

transmitted over centuries, and recounted in the third person, usually have a timeless

quality, but in *Sexing the Cherry*'s rewriting, the tales are told by the protagonists in

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[78] Warner asserts that 'the Old Wive's Tale' by George Peele (c 1590) marks the first moment 'when oral fairy tales become fixed in print as popular entertainment' in England (1994, 14).

their own imagined life-time. Notions of chronological time and stability of tradition are disrupted in this postmodern re-envisioning of the tale.

The origins of fairy tales cannot be found; their authors are multiple and span centuries and even the written versions of these anonymous tales are multiple and ever-changing. Nevertheless, or perhaps, *because* of this, the tales have 'staying power [...] because the meanings they generate are themselves magical shape-shifters, dancing to the needs of their audience' (Warner 1994, xxiii-xxiv). The 'staying power' of the stories is evident in their power to enlist the reader in *Sexing the Cherry*'s postmodern retelling. In fact, their very anonymity and age traditionally conferred on their tellers 'the authority of traditional wisdom accumulated over the past', an authority which is challenged and usurped here to discourage readers from naturally accepting what is ancient and traditional as right and natural (Warner 1994, 25). Like fairy tales, the origins of *Sexing the Cherry* are unstable, multiple, and oral, implicitly rebutting any notion of authority or ownership of a text on the part of the Author. The text is imbued with quotations, textual references and social discourses on marriage, power, gender and sexuality.

It blends oral and written forms by giving the princesses 'voices' in a written text, which consists of a web of citations from written and oral culture. *Sexing the Cherry*'s reconfiguration of fairy tales and an array of other texts challenges a metaphysics of presence; it calls the Grimm brothers' tale to mind, but even their tale demonstrates the invasion of speech into writing, showing that signifying practice is neither wholly verbal nor written. *Sexing the Cherry* gestures to the orality of the fairy tale genre, carrying it on in written form: the story is not simply related to the reader by an omniscient narrator, but is a story within a story, where each princess relays her own micronarrative, orally, to Jordan in a written text. This meshing of oral and written forms confutes the Western metaphysical logic of identity and non-contradiction which

confines meaning to an origin centred on presence rather than absence. This philosophical tradition sets up speech and writing in a hierarchical opposition in which speech is privileged, and writing denounced. Speech (presence) is favoured because of the belief that meaning and intention are imparted at the moment words are uttered, in comparison to writing (absence), where the author is no longer present to control meaning. Jacques Derrida notes in his essay 'Differance' that these binary oppositions do not hold, as speech is pervaded by spaces and absences and modified by spelling. It is in fact the trace of rejected signifiers in each signifier which makes meaning possible; in this context, speech signifies by alluding to what it is not, that is, writing. The other invades the selfsame; texts, it follows, are not structured by presence, but by traces.

The fact that meaning depends on the trace highlights the traversal of texts by the traces of all other texts. Language is 'a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences' (Derrida 1978, 354). No ultimately final meaning can ever be reached because the meaning of each signifier is deferred. Meaning is made in difference; meanings dance and are never stable, preventing a 'final' meaning of a text from ever being reached. Barthes explains that the text 'practises the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier and the signifier must not be conceived of as "the first stage of meaning", its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its *deferred action*' (Barthes 1977a, 158). Like the dance of the princesses, meanings in texts are always simultaneously traced and deferred. Derrida notes that 'one could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitless of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence' (1997, 50). Just as the signifier dances, questioning the metaphysics of presence, so too each text 'plays' with its intertexts, dances with them, and invites the reader to partake in this game.

Sexing the Cherry further rejects authority by acknowledging the impossibility

of originality as novelty, or complete newness. A problem encountered by many

postmodern writers is one of the anxiety of authorship: the problem of trying to create

something new when so much has been written in the past.[79] The text demonstrates that

any contemporary concerns that all forms and possibilities have been used up by

previous literary movements need give no cause for despondency, and displays the

'difference between the *fact* of aesthetic ultimacies and their artistic *use*' (Barth 1982,

6). Winterson's text overcomes the pressure to write something entirely different from

canonical texts by transforming and reconfiguring them as something positive to be

embraced by feminist readers and writers. Ownership and originality are rejected by this

text, which is based upon another text, the origins of which are uncertain and varied.

Authority and ownership are literally refuted in the content of this new tale, as the

princesses are no longer owned by their husbands or by their father. In contrast to the

'original', the story of the princesses, as told by themselves, calls into question the

'truth' of stories, and highlights how different tellings of the same story can offer

entirely new perspectives. Not only is the eldest princess's story different to the

'original' tale, but it also diverges from her youngest sister's recollection of events later

in the text. While the Grimms' version is told by an omniscient narrator and only the

youngest and eldest princesses are granted dialogue, Winterson's retelling allows each

of the princesses to tell their 'own' stories. Although each princess is the teller of her

'own story', the words can be interpreted in different ways by the reader, and so

presence or Authority cannot be attributed to them, either.

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[79] This has been most notably explored by Harold Bloom as an Oedipal struggle against Author-forefathers, but treated differently by John Barth, who points out that 'literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can never be exhausted—its "meaning" residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language' (1982, 38).

Remembering a Women's Tradition

Sexing the Cherry points to the orality of old wives' tales, which were 'authorised' in their written form 'by the postulation of a narrator, a grandmotherly or nanny type [...] and by the consequent style, which imitates speech, with chatty asides, apparently spontaneous exclamations, [and] direct appeals to the imaginary circle round the hearth' (Warner 1994, 25). The princesses' tales, then, remind the reader not only of the oral history, but also the feminine tradition of fairy tales. Although the reconfigured tale subverts misogynist aspects of traditional fairy tales, it also gestures positively towards the role of women in transmitting such tales and their close ties to the genre. The novel subverts negative, misogynistic and patriarchal aspects of fairy tales where female characters are either passive, lacklustre heroines or cruel, wicked witches or stepmothers. This prevalent view of fairy tales owes much to their modification and popularization not only by the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen, but also, and by no means, least, by Walt Disney, in whose cartoons 'passive hapless heroines and vigorous wicked older women seemed generic' (Warner 1994, 207). Although it would be naive to blame images of female hatred and cruelty in fairy tales like 'Rapunzel', 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty' purely on male authors and interpreters, they have certainly contributed to and confirmed such negative images (Warner 1994, 207). *Sexing the Cherry* plays with these *popular* versions of the tales, making them and the changes made to them recognisable to the reader, who is invited to take up a critical position.

However, the text does not simply call on the negative portrayal of female characters in traditional fairy tales, but also invites the reader to acknowledge women's long-standing links with the genre. Although many fairy tales are associated with male writers such as the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen, the storyteller's voice

is often a female one.[80] Male writers of such stories may ascribe a female point of view

to them, as 'the voice of the old nurse lends reliability to the tale, stamps it as authentic,

rather than the concoction of the storyteller himself' (Warner 1994, 209). Even when

tales are told or written by men, the fantasy of a woman's original voice and 'attributing

to women testimony about women's wrongs and wrongdoings gives them added value:

men might be expected to find women flighty, rapacious, self-seeking, cruel and lustful,

but if women say such things about themselves, then the matter is settled. What some

women say against others can be usefully turned against all of them' (Warner 1994,

209). *Sexing the Cherry* usurps the voice of an imaginary female narrator, often

employed by men to reinforce misogynist ideals, and allows the female characters to tell

their 'own' stories. It also goes one step further by granting the princesses their 'own'

voices; traditional fairy tales are never told by characters or in the first person of the

protagonist (Warner 1994, 215).

All but one of the princesses live in a house they have bought together and it is

in different areas of the accommodation that they relate their stories to Jordan.

Formally, their location in a domestic sphere recalls the setting many fairy tales were

historically told in; thematically, it also challenges traditional fairy tales, in which

princesses only acquire homes by marrying princes. The princesses' economic

independence and vociferousness is at odds with the conventional portrayal of

heroines.[81] On another level, the reinscription also gestures towards women's

storytelling powers: as the very fact of the Grimms' transcription shows, male writers

and collectors 'often pass on women's stories from intimate or domestic milieux'

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[80] Possibly one of the earliest references to the fairytale genre is from Plato in the *Gorgias*, who referred disparagingly to *mythos graos* or, the old wives' tale, which was 'told by nurses to amuse and frighten children' (Warner 1994, 14).

[81] Although this is broadly true, there were also resourceful, independent heroines. See Carter (1990) and Ragan (1998) for tales with such heroic and strong female protagonists.

(Warner 17).[82] Warner notes that although 'the ultimate origin, in time and place, of a fairy tale can never really be pinned down, [....] the predominant pattern reveals older women of a lower status handing on the material to younger people' (1994, 16-17).[83] Of course, 'it would be absurd to argue that storytelling was an exclusively female activity', but the links to women are nonetheless significant in this text, which rewrites fairy tales from a feminist perspective (Warner 1994, 21).[84] *Sexing the Cherry* does not just subvert a misogynist fairy tale, which refuses an escape for women and forces them to stop dancing; it also invites the reader to pay homage to women's story-telling powers in a tradition which has many links to women's and domestic spheres.[85]

Subjectivity and the Dancing Reader

Many critics have doubted that texts can influence subjectivity or provide a valuable tool for 'real' women to resist dominant discourses. Further charges have often been voiced against the capacity of such genres as fantasy, science fiction, and fairy tales to

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[82] 'The Grimm Brothers' most inspiring and prolific sources were women, from families of friends and close relations' (Warner 1994, 19-20). They invited storytellers to their home to tell the tales aloud while the brothers wrote them down. The visitors were mostly educated young women from the middle class or aristocracy who related tales they had heard from nursemaids, governesses and servants (Zipes 1999, 69-70).

[83] Warner also remarks that numerous fairy tales were not only told orally by women, but women also wrote down many of them. Although Charles Perrault (1628-1703) is the best known 'pioneer teller of fairy tales', he was actually greatly outnumbered by women writers whose work has now 'faded from view' (1994, xvi). In addition, these women 'who inaugurated the fashion for the written fairy tale, in Paris at the end of the seventeenth century, consistently claimed they had heard the stories they were retelling from nurses and servants' (Warner 1994, 18).

[84] How then, are fairy tales misogynist even when told by women? Warner asserts that they must be considered in the historical circumstances in which they were told: 'the misogyny present in many fairy stories—the wicked stepmothers, bad fairies, ogresses, spoiled princesses, ugly sisters and so forth—has lost its connections to the particular web of tensions in which women were enmeshed and come to look dangerously like the way things are' (1994, 417). The female narrator often acts as a surrogate mother to children who were abandoned or whose mothers died in childbirth. When told by older women to grandchildren, wicked mothers are often supplanted by fairy godmothers, signalling the economic vulnerability of older women and fear of their daughter-in-laws. For a detailed analysis of this see Warner 201-240 (1994).

[85] A number of critics have briefly referred to *Sexing the Cherry*'s tale as a feminist revision of fairy tales, and have concentrated on its comments on marriage and heterosexuality, for example, Doan (1994, 150-151), Gonzalez-Abalos (1996, 288-289), Onega (1996, 307), Langland (1997, 101) and Smith (2005 29, 35, 46). Only Onega (1999, 445) and Langland (1997, 101) have noted some intertextual operators in the princesses' retellings. None have commented on the fairy tale's connection with women, choosing instead to view the genre in its traditional form as purely harmful to women.

incite change in contemporary Western culture, or 'reality'. What can such texts, which seem so far removed from 'reality', offer readers, other than passive escapism? The influences and effects that fairy tales have had on subjectivity are clearly evident when the purposes of some of their transcriptions are considered. Although they encourage the use of the imagination, fairy tales have also been employed to promote certain attitudes in young readers, teaching them what are considered to be dominant, correct modes of behaviour and reinforcing social arrangements and expectations.

In the preface to the second volume of their *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, the Grimm brothers refer to it as an '*Erziehungsbuch*', that is, an educational book for the correct raising of children. In their numerous transcriptions, the brothers 'carefully reshaped or "sanitized" the tales [and] [...] often omitted or softened sexually explicit material. Though they excised many of the most violent episodes, they retained much punitive violence' (Zipes 2000, 480). The brothers infused their tales with Christian fervour and prevailing social values by eliminating sexual elements, bolstering the moral strokes of the narrative, punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous (Zipes 2000, 211).[86] Although the tales are often set in wondrous surroundings where anything can happen, 'this very boundlessness serves the moral purpose of the tales, which is precisely to teach where boundaries lie' (Warner 1994, xx). The boundaries set out in fairy tales not only address those of morality and Christianity, but are also instrumental in denoting outlines for the 'proper' behaviour of sons and daughters, fathers and mothers and different social classes. The Grimms accentuated specific role models for male and female protagonists, in line with the dominant patriarchal code of the time, which exerted an influence on the behaviour of the young and the old (Zipes 1999, 74).

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[86] For further reading on the conservative alterations the Grimms made to fairy tales, see Zipes, who notes several changes made to traditional tales such as 'Cinderella', 'Snow White', and 'Hansel and Gretel', and explains that in the 1870s, the Grimms' tales were part of the teaching curriculum in certain German principalities, including Prussia (1999, 74-79).

The power and gender structures reinforced by the Grimms' tales are questioned and reconfigured in *Sexing the Cherry* to expose and transform the type of subject position offered to readers in such texts. *Sexing the Cherry* self-consciously alerts readers to, and demystifies, those naturalized mythologies that they internalise at a young age. There is an implicit recognition of Lacan's analysis of the role of language in the construction of the subject, and therefore also of the importance of literature in providing subjects with a way to relate to their 'real' existence. If literature can help people to see themselves and their world in a certain way, it can also call those positions into question. Although fairy tales are often used as a vehicle for constricting and shaping children's behaviour, especially with regard to gender roles, *Sexing the Cherry* usurps this power, or 'steals the tool' and encourages the power of the imagination to envision different ideologies.

Sexing the Cherry's fairy tale, then, is anything but removed from real life; it invites active participation from readers in denaturalizing the accepted roles and ideals in their own society. The text encourages an awareness of the power of fairy tales, and literature in general, to influence subjectivity; in a subversive move, it reconfigures positions traditionally offered to readers. At numerous stages in the novel, the political and critical potential of literature and art is self-consciously pointed out. The text encourages the reader to look beyond the customary:

> It is certainly true that a criterion for true art [...] is its ability to take us [...] to this other different place where we are free from the problems of gravity. When we are drawn into the art we are drawn out of ourselves. (Winterson 1990, 91)

This radical retelling also calls on some of the more positive aspects of traditional fairy tales, such as their basis in utopian ideals and their portrayals of other ways of seeing the world. The fantasies in Winterson's text, though, consistently encounter the real and constantly refer to the contemporary world to ensure that the tales are never cut off from

the contexts they address. The characters' speech is permeated with metafictive motifs like 'happily ever after', and contemporary language and tones, self-consciously drawing attention to the impact of fiction on readers as well as preventing them from slipping into a fantasy world. It is often the similarities between the situations of the twelve princesses and that of women in contemporary culture that invite the reader to consider the out-dated mythologies they still encounter in everyday life, not just in fairy tales. *Sexing the Cherry*'s fairy tale does not pander to escapism, but interacts with the contemporary world, allowing fantasy 'to bridge the gap between harsh reality and a more hopeful construction of the social imaginary', offering the possibility of 'resistance and alternative realizations of identity, in that fantasy can offer far more potentialities than reality' (Burns 1996, 304).[87]

Although the tales have been used historically as restrictive and censoring forces, their anonymity and popularity have also been instrumental in providing outlets for challenging conventions. Many writers of the genre have 'wrapped its cloak of unreality around them; adopting its traditional formal simplicities they have attempted to challenge received ideas and raise questions into the minds of their audience: protest and fairy tale have long been associated. In conditions of censorship [...] fantasies can lead the censor a merry dance (Warner 1994, 411).[88] Although *Sexing the Cherry* may not have to bypass censorship as it is commonly understood, it nevertheless suggests alternatives to accepted social standards and ideals in Western society, especially the marginalization of homosexuality, the inevitability of marriage, and the presumption that love is a natural part of marriage. The values and standards set out in fairy tales can still be altered because 'we, the audience, you, the reader, are part of the story's future

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[87] For a discussion of Winterson's texts as active fantasies of resistance which do not slide into escapism, see Christy L. Burns (1996) as well as Susana Gonzalez-Abalos, who argues that fantasy in *Sexing the Cherry* shows the established social order to be 'normative, conventional and questionable rather than natural and inevitable' by stressing the way in which 'human reality is not a given, but is ideologically constructed' (1996, 292).
[88] Warner's examples of such conditions are in Paris under Louis XIV and in Prague before 1989 (1994, 411).

as well, its patterns are rising under the pressures of your palms, our fingers, too'

(Warner 1994, 411). The story becomes a site of a struggle of beliefs, morals and

traditions; the reader is invited to join in this dance with new and subversive stories and

to take steps away from traditional and regimented marches.

The fact that the princesses are dancers has important implications for their

subjectivity: to dance is to turn oneself around in many aspects of life, to have the

ability to take the initiative and play many roles. Dancers have to be dynamic and

versatile. Elsewhere in the novel, a single sentence invites the reader to consider this

dancing subjectivity as an alternative to a stable identity: 'The inward life tells us that

we are multiple not single, and that our one existence is really countless existences

holding hands like those cut-out paper dolls, but unlike the dolls never coming to an

end' (Winterson 1990, 90). This text presents many different types of women and does

not make all women equal to 'woman'; it reconceptualizes female identity as an open

range of possibilities and gives a plurality of perspectives on what 'woman' is or

conceivably could be. It allows women to see themselves in a labyrinth of multiple

possibilities, perspectives, and identities, where there is no clear split between 'I' and

'not-I'. In the tale, each princess is granted an entire page or more to tell her story, and

yet each tale is next to another; the women are independent yet linked. The princesses'

multiple voices in the novel open up a range of places to speak from; a pluralisation

which prevents essentialism. The princesses and readers ultimately have the power to

resist the dominant subject position offered to them.

Blending and Clashing the Sublime with the Comic

Sexing the Cherry acknowledges the literature of the past and refashions it; like *The*

Dancers Dancing, it looks back in order to move forward, not only blending past and

present, but by doing so in such a way as to question what lies in the future, providing a space for the reader to form new attitudes. In 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' Kristeva explains that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (1980c, 66). Writing, then, is a reading of previous literature and an absorption of and reply to it. *Sexing the Cherry* incorporates previous literature, challenges the ideas offered therein, and manipulates it to give a new result. The text attempts to reverse dominant conceptions of what is 'natural' and 'normal' in society by exposing the reader to a whole range of competing discourses. Foucault describes discourses as 'tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy' (1979, 101-102).

Subjectivity is linguistically constructed and scattered through the range of discourses which constitute the subject. Individuals take up subject positions offered to them in discourses in order to be involved in the social formation. Just as discourses are not unified and undergo change, so too does the subject; it is always in process. Barthes explains that a text does not have a single meaning, traceable to its Author's intention, but is rather a site of action where the clash of various discourses has the potential to throw the traditional reader into crisis:

> We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning
>
> (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety
>
> of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations
>
> drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (1977b, 146)

The juxtaposition or 'blending and clashing' of different discourses, tones and intertexts in *Sexing the Cherry*'s reconfigured fairy tale offers readers the opportunity to feel ironic and witty at the expense of the 'original' texts.

In the tale of the fifth princess, for example, the reader is invited to feel witty at the expense of 'Rapunzel' as well as 'The Tale of the Twelve Dancing Princesses'. Rapunzel is not kept prisoner in the tower by a witch, but leaves her family to live in it with an older woman (the fifth princess) and blocks up its entrance to escape their disapproving attacks on 'the happy pair' (Winterson 1990, 52). She and the princess are vilified by her family, who call 'one a witch and the other a little girl', pointing to culture's long-standing habit of glorifying or vilifying women in a Madonna/whore binary opposition, as well as highlighting culture's association of witches with wickedness and little girls with weakness. Although these are only names, the text points to the power that names can have over how people are perceived (Winterson 1990, 52). In the fifth princess's story, attention is drawn to specific words and their social and historical connotations, freeing them in this context from their presupposed 'natural' values. The reader becomes aware that they are terms used in cruelty only and may no longer rely upon them to distinguish between virtue and vice.

The tale of Rapunzel is further modified by the description of the prince, whose masculine reputation is called into question: 'One day the prince, who had always liked to borrow his mother's frocks, dressed up as Rapunzel's lover and dragged himself into the tower' (Winterson 1990, 52). This is a stark contrast to the traditional image of a powerful, handsome, and stereotypically masculine prince, which the reader expects to encounter. The description is comic and, in one sense, constitutes a reversal of the characteristics the prince is traditionally given. On another level, though, it prompts a certain discomfort in the reader, who is invited to question gender norms throughout the text, but might fall into the trap here of jeering at the prince because he is feminized. His feminization is later contrasted with his violent treatment of the witch and his ultimate victory in securing Rapunzel, with whom he lived 'happily ever after'

(Winterson 1990, 52). Masculine and feminine qualities are shown not to exist on opposite ends of a binary opposition, but to be culturally constructed.

At the close of the fifth princess's tale, she confides that after she had been blinded by the prince, she found her sisters and came to live with them. The prince she had married, we hear, turned into a frog the first time she kissed him, in a reversal of such tales as *The Frog Prince* and *Beauty and the Beast*. In these stories the male protagonists are transformed by the actions of the heroine, whose role is to tame the hero and uncover his 'true' identity.[89] Fairy tales like these can sometimes be seen as positive because they often 'attack received ideas: monsters turn out to be handsome young princes, beggars princesses, ugly old women powerful and benevolent fairies' (Warner 1994, 415), but *Sexing the Cherry* points to the stereotypical naming and values promoted in such oppositional thinking. It enacts a strategic reversal, turning a princess into a witch and a prince into a frog, and inviting the reader to consider that their meanings are not natural and stable, but formed in culture.

A distance is maintained from the Grimms' tale of Rapunzel in the text's inclusion of modern phrases such as 'the prince next door'. This juxtaposition of modern and fairytale language creates a clash which invites the reader to question the connotations they bring as well as situating the tale closer to contemporary life. The fifth princess tells of how she and Rapunzel climbed into the tower using Rapunzel's hair, but this fantasy is interrupted by a sceptical phrase which plummets the reader back to reality: 'Both of them could have used a ladder, but they were in love' (Winterson 1990, 52). This tale invites readers to laugh at the expense of the original Grimm tale and the ideals it upholds and to form new ideas in place of the ones they have just rejected. Irony challenges the reader to actively think about what is intended

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[89] This theme is prevalent not only in these fairy tales, but permeates romantic fiction, e.g. Jane Eyre, in which the patience and perseverance of the female character allows the 'true nature' of the hero to be brought to light. These tales ultimately end in marriage, providing a respectable role in society for the heroine.

by words; it forgets any false security that words only mean what they say. Based upon

setting up a relation between what is said and what is unsaid, irony involves a distancing

from one meaning and the creation of another, so that an evaluative attitude always

pervades it. Meaning is differential, not inherent; nothing has meaning in itself, but

rather means by reference to other words and concepts; by juxtaposing fairytale and

everyday language, the text denaturalizes meanings which are often accepted to be

'natural' and 'true'. The fifth princess's conclusion to the tale of her ex-lover, Rapunzel,

is full of irony: 'After that they lived happily ever after, of course' (Winterson 1990,

52). It is the 'of course' that is most ironic in this sentence and it serves to undermine

the inevitability of fairy tale endings.

This blending and clashing of discourses means that the reader cannot settle on

one discourse in particular, any more than the writer can. The text is 'at once sublime

and comic', as Barthes explains:

> Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic
>
> and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the
>
> writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only
>
> power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never
>
> to rest on any one of them. (1977b, 146)

In this tale, prohibitions and their transgressions exist together; it critiques the

institution of marriage, the privileging of heterosexuality, as well as patriarchal power

structures, by juxtaposing the comic and tragic. The text is both sublime and comic at

once, but there is a balance between the two so as to avoid 'becoming either the scene of

law or the scene of its parody, in order to become the scene of its *other*' (Kristeva

1980c, 80). The text, then, avoids offering readers a position from which it is most

intelligible, and instead promotes undecidability; although it poses challenges to

traditional texts, it does not set itself up as simply opposing their values. It avoids

'becoming the scene of law', which would simply involve offering readers another decree to be obeyed, and instead asks readers to rewrite the cultural script and challenge cultural 'laws'. The juxtaposition of humorous and terrible elements in many of the stories is politically and socially disturbing, not least because of the violence inherent in them and the questions it provokes.

Murderous Princesses: Heroes or Villains?

A potential problem presented in *Sexing the Cherry*'s feminist re-vision is that although power changes hands, the nature of power itself is not investigated. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault constructs 'an analytics of power that no longer takes law as a model and a code' and refrains from seeing power in terms of old monarchical models (1979, 90). He explains that power is generally seen as something repressive, which is enforced from above. This perception is highly restrictive though, as power is something that cannot be seized, escaped from, nor traced back to an individual. In order to operate, it requires something to react against: 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. [...] It is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (Foucault 1979, 93). Accordingly, wherever there is power, there is resistance. Resistance should not be seen as a way of *escaping* power in any way, as it is not possible to be in a position 'outside' of power. Power cannot be entirely dismantled, but authority coming from certain directions can certainly be undermined. *Sexing the Cherry* demonstrates that power can be re-appropriated by the 'weaker' party for their own use, but the question is whether it is useful here or not.

Although the text successfully usurps and rewrites a traditionally misogynist genre, enacting 'power from below', the violent acts committed by many of the

princesses may be at odds with dancing toward a better future. Their deeds can be read

as simple reversals of power, where 'victims' take revenge upon men who have harmed

them, inverting situations and changing nothing about the nature of power or how it

may be used. The second princess mummifies her husband, the third shoots her beloved

and his lover with a bow and arrow, the fourth leaves her cheating husband raddled with

disease, the seventh kills her lover before she is killed by a blood-thirsty crowd, and the

eleventh smashes her husband's skull with a silver candlestick because he asks her to

kill him.[90] One tale in particular presents what appears to be unwarranted violence to the

reader: the eighth princess poisons her husband who is 'the fattest man in the village'

(Winterson 1990, 55). Pre-meditated murder is blended with fantastical imagery when,

after she poisoned him, 'out of his belly came a herd of cattle and a fleet of pigs, all

blinking in the light and covered in milk' (Winterson 1990, 55). Again, this other-

worldly fairy tale imagery is contrasted with the princess's jibe that 'he had always

complained about his digestion' (Winterson 1990, 55). It is ironic that the more realistic

phrase is the one which invites readers to laugh all the more, but they are

simultaneously placed in positions of discomfort because the husband's indigestion

humanises him. Although the story is clearly fantasy which blends comedy and

violence, it has serious undertones which unsettle the reader.

This tale draws attention to how activities are gendered in traditional culture and

hints that the princess may not have felt the urge to murder if she had not been confined

to traditional feminine roles: when her husband explodes and cattle and pigs issue from

his belly, she explains 'I rounded them up and set off to find my sisters. I prefer farming

to cookery' (Winterson 1990, 55). She silences him, just as her needs had been

suppressed. Or perhaps this is a simple inversion of the docile and passive position

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[90] Not all the tales end in violence; some of the princesses simply leave their husbands and choose to come to terms with their anger or disappointment rather than taking revenge. One violent incident is, ironically, carried out to save a lover from a violent mob: the seventh princess kills for love (Winterson 1990, 54). Not all the men in the story are violent or cruel either. It is the high number of violent acts perpetrated by the princesses, however, that must be called into question here.

conventionally granted to women in traditional fairy tales. The brutality in this tale may also point to the harm that certain representations of women can cause, and the violence at stake in all stories: they can violently place women in restrictive positions or they can let them dance.

Aggression against men, as well as the princesses' all-female community, calls to mind the 'more radical feminist currents' Kristeva describes in the 'second phase' of feminism, which seeks to distance itself from linear time and history in an effort to create a countersociety, which is 'a sort of alter ego of the official society' (1981b, 27). This countersociety is 'without prohibitions, free and fulfilling' and 'a place outside the law' (Kristeva 1981b, 27). It is based on 'the expulsion of an excluded element, a scapegoat charged with the evil of which the community duly constituted can then purge itself; a purge which will finally exonerate that community of any future criticism' (Kristeva 1981b, 27). Making a scapegoat of the other sex risks this kind of feminism becoming 'an inverted sexism' where power changes hands without changing its nature. Kristeva links this problem directly to violence, specifically to the violence endured by certain women being counterinvested by those women themselves (1981b, 27-28).

The ninth princess counterinvests the violence she has endured, and takes revenge on her abusive husband by tearing his liver from his body. Her husband had called her 'Jess' because 'that is the name of the hood which restrains the falcon' (Winterson 1990, 56). He treated her like an animal, chaining her to their bed when he was away, and when they made love 'he said he had to have [her] above him, in case [she] picked his eyes out in the faltering candlelight' (Winterson 1990, 56). The princess recalls how her husband 'said my nose was sharp and cruel and that my eyes had madness in them. He said I would tear him to pieces if he dealt softly with me', and explains that 'I was none of these things, but I became them' (Winterson 1990, 56). This

tale demonstrates the influence of language on the subject and shows that power wielded from above can easily be inverted. It also rejects the notion that each individual has an essential human nature unaffected by social and environmental conditioning. The princess narrates how she took her revenge: 'I flew off his wrist and tore his liver from his body, and bit my chain in pieces and left him with his eyes open. He looked surprised, I don't know why. As your lover describes you, so you are' (Winterson 1990, 56). Rather than trying to prove that she is different to how her husband perceives her to be, she takes on those characteristics, using his ill-treatment of her as a means to take revenge and make her escape.[91] She symbolically metamorphoses into a falcon that can fly instead of remaining restricted by 'the hood which restrains the falcon' (Winterson 1990, 56).

The princess's actions might be read as an indictment of the notion that violence is created and perpetrated by men and that women, in opposition, possess essential nurturing, peacemaking qualities. The ideology of heroism might also be denaturalised here by allowing the princesses to take on those traits usually admired in the princes and heroes of fairytales and myths, inviting the reader to see such behaviour as undesirable: 'If you're a hero you can be an idiot, behave badly, ruin your personal life, have any number of mistresses and talk about yourself all the time, and nobody minds' (Winterson 1990, 117-118). Whereas young women were primarily docile and passive in older tales, and men were violent and courageous, these new tales invert those power relations. There is a problematic aspect to this: it simply exposes the injustices which male heroism promotes but fails to problematise the premise upon which it is based. It transfers a stereotypically male way of negotiating conflict onto women, thus inverting

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[91] This tale recalls Bertha of *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and such 'Madwomen in the Attic'. In these tales, men's control and restriction of women results in them eventually becoming what they have been told they are. This tale shows that a kind of madness can provide an escape from such restrictions, as explained by Shoshana Felman in her article 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy' (1991).

rather than subverting power relations. Violence is a means to power in the tale of the ninth princess, which does not take into account that although power may perpetrate violence, the struggle against it need not be violent. If power is to be changed, it must be reconceptualized instead of merely changing hands.

Violent actions set in humorous or fantastical circumstances can be read with anxiety or enjoyment—readers are offered alternative positions, invited to collude with aggression or to recoil from it in disgust—and each possible reading has certain implications.[92] Although this modern fairy tale often presents freedom as stemming from violence, readers can rejoice in the cycle of harmful acts or they may be encouraged to question this use of power. Ultimately, the violence endemic in contemporary society is revealed, but no end to it is envisioned because no end to violence is envisioned. *Sexing the Cherry* replicates the punitive violence in traditional fairy tales, but simply redirects it at men. Unlike the 'original' fairytales, however, the violence in Winterson's tale does not offer itself as easily intelligible by presenting romantic resolutions, or offering readers positions of comfortable familiarity. The position of knowing subjectivity offered by classic realism to passive consumers is rejected here in favour of undecidability between several positions. The meaning of the text cannot easily be grasped; readers must constantly grapple with it and actively try to produce meanings for themselves.

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[92] Susana Onega notes that the princesses' stories are as 'violently man-hating' as the ten commandments on dealing with men that Jordan reads during his cross-dressing period. However, Onega notes that two readings are possible: the text can be interpreted as negotiating male and female subjectivity and denouncing women's oppression, or as an effort to denounce patriarchy with the aim of an 'equally sexist, vindictive, self-righteous and totalizing matriarchal order' (1996, 311).

Fortunata's Dance

Although many of the tales do not fully investigate power, Fortunata, the youngest

sister, asserts power from below in a way which avoids violence. Punished for dancing

by her father, she must marry the prince who had followed her and her sisters on their

adventures, but she escapes the wedding and any reliance on these men, by forging a

career as a dancer. Fortunata uses that tool which had been denied her, and which she

had been punished for, to assert power against her oppressors. She explains to Jordan

that she ran out of the church and then 'took a boat and sailed round the world earning

[her] living as a dancer' (Winterson 1990, 95).

It should be noted that when Fortunata is referred to here, or indeed any

character in the text, it is not to grant her 'a future, an unconscious, a soul', as if she

existed (Barthes 1990, 94). I am not interested in her 'person' as if it is 'a moral

freedom endowed with motives and an overdetermination of meanings', but rather in

her figure, as 'an impersonal network of symbols combined under the proper name

"[Fortunata]"' (Barthes 1990, 94). We are 'developing connotations, not pursuing

investigations; we are not searching for the truth of [Fortunata]' (Barthes 1990, 94). The

Proper Name, in textuality, 'is an instrument of exchange: it allows the substitution of a

nominal unit for a collection of characteristics' (Barthes 1990, 95). The 'connotations'

and 'characteristics' developed under the name of Fortunata are multiple, dancing

subjectivities (Barthes 1990, 95).

The figure of Fortunata makes the whole text dance; 'The Story of the Twelve

Dancing Princesses' imparts the stories of eleven of the princesses, but the tale of the

youngest sister traverses the rest of the text, outside the visible frame for the tale of the

princesses. The story of the princesses, then, cannot be stabilised and confined to

sixteen pages of *Sexing the Cherry* or read distinctly from the rest of the text, as

references to Fortunata pervade it, both before and after the section in which the tale

appears to be set off by itself. The best dancer of all the princesses, Fortunata appears both outside and inside her sisters' tale; formal boundaries are disputed as well as the boundaries and binary oppositions that Western metaphysical thought uses to categorise and stabilise in an effort to avoid chaos. The text dances: Barthes explains that the text 'only exists in the movement of a discourse [...]. *The text is experienced only in an activity of production*. It follows that the Text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across' (1977a, 157). Formally, then, there is no closure to the princesses' tales because Fortunata carries on their story, making it dance throughout the entirety of *Sexing the Cherry* and inviting the reader to work to produce these disseminated meanings.

Thematically, Fortunata's story does not provide closure to her sisters' tales either; in fact, it allows those tales to dance even further steps. When Fortunata tells Jordan that she ran out of the church on her wedding day, it conflicts with her eldest sister's version of events:

> 'But the story they told me about you was not the same. That you escaped, yes, but that you flew away and walked on a wire stretched from the steeple of the church to the mast of a ship at anchor in the bay.'
>
> She laughed. How could such a thing be possible?
>
> 'But,' I said, 'how could it be possible to fly every night from the window to an enchanted city when there are no such places?'
>
> 'Are there not such places?' she said, and I fell silent, not knowing how to answer. (Winterson 1990, 95)

This calls into question the truth not only of stories, but of what is believed to be 'reality', encouraging readers to use their imaginative powers to envision change. The difference in Fortunata's account invites readers to question the truth of stories they are told and points to the contingency of storytelling. After being invited to drift into the

feeling that they know where the text is going and confident that they know the story of how Fortunata escaped her wedding, readers are placed in a position where they must step between two versions of a story.

Chronology is also challenged as Fortunata's sections tell what happened up to the beginning of the eldest's summation of events, imparted earlier in the text. Furthermore, the reader encounters Fortunata's dancing school before Jordan discovers her on her island, an anticlimactic move, which challenges the conventions of quest stories and realist fiction, as well as disputing chronological storytelling (Winterson 1990, 72). Even when Jordan finds her dancing school, he suggests that it may all be a dream, and the scene he describes 'may lie in the future or the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her. I cannot be sure. Either I am remembering her or I am still imagining her' (Winterson 1990, 93). Toward the end of the text Jordan tells his mother that Fortunata is 'a woman who does not exist', yet ironically proceeds to relate the story of Artemis and Orion as she had relayed it to him (Winterson 1990, 131-134).

Jordan first encounters Fortunata in his travels of the mind in a house in the magical 'city of words', where there are no floors, only ceilings (Winterson 1990, 20).[93] The text literalizes a world without foundations — in a metaphor that opposes metaphysical, foundational logic. In this city without floors, scepticism towards origins and foundations is played out: 'It is well known that the ceiling of one room is the floor of another, but the household ignores this ever-downward necessity and continues ever upward, celebrating ceilings but denying floors, and so their house never ends' (Winterson 1990, 20-21). Just like this household, the novel itself does not allow for any 'downward necessity' or search for origins; rather it spirals upward, like the dancing princesses, embracing whatever it encounters on its way. Even the princesses' dances are not tied down; they float while they dance, because they are so light, challenging

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[93] Susana Onega notes that Jordan's travels combine echoes of Borges, Swift and Cortázar, and that the city of words is built like a spiralling Library of Babel (1996, 303).

stability and any *grounding* in a logic premised on binary oppositions (Winterson 1990, 98).

Fortunata later describes the city where she and her sisters danced, but in contrast to the traditional fairy tale's underground castle, this city is groundless; it is founded neither on metaphysical logic nor the laws of physics. To begin with, no one in the city danced; they

> paid their taxes and brought up their children and ate and slept like the rest of the world. But that was when the city was also like the rest of the world, and seemed to be still. Of course, some of the cleverer people knew that the world is endlessly in motion, but since they could not feel it they ignored it. (Winterson 1990, 95- 96)

When the city began to move, people panicked, but then 'started to adjust to their new rolling circumstances', and when 'a few generations passed [...] no one remembered that the city had ever been like any other [...]. It became natural for the citizens to spend their lives suspended, the walking turned into leaping, and leaping into dancing' (Winterson 1990, 96). *Sexing the Cherry* resists stable signification and challenges norms: those things previously thought to bolster the foundations of meaning are disturbed. The text proposes that things that are accepted as natural and normal in society can be rethought, and although change seems unsteadying at first, people can adapt to it, so that it, in turn, seems 'natural'. The text suggests that instead of adhering to the logic of binary oppositions we have been taught to accept, we might acknowledge that meaning dances, that nothing is stable or unified, including liberal humanist identity.

Dancing subjectivity, rather than an illusory, coherent identity, is played out in Fortunata's dance. Fortunata is the only one of the princesses who is given a name. Like 'Snow White', 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty', her name is symbolic: her destiny is

to be fortunate or prosperous by good luck or favourable chance. Like these other female protagonists of fairy tales, she is emblematic, but she is an emblem not of passive femininity, beauty, or powerlessness, but of independence, strength, and the ability not only to dance, but to teach others how to dance. In an italicised section of text, told by an unidentified narrator, the reader learns how Fortunata turns her dancing pupils into points of light. The identity of the narrator cannot be established: the fruit icon that usually indicates who is speaking is not given at the beginning of this section, and the speaker remains unnamed. The plural nature of the text can truly be appreciated here as the reader does not know who is speaking; it is 'impossible to attribute an origin, a point of view, to the statement' (Barthes 1990, 41). The plurality and multifarious nature of subjectivity is played out in Fortunata's pupils' dances:

> *At a dancing school in a remote place, Fortunata teaches her pupils to become points of light. [...] Most, she releases like butterflies over a flowering world. Bodies that could have bent double and grown numb she maintains as metal in a fiery furnace [...]. She believes that we are fallen creatures who once knew how to fly [...]. It is her job to channel the light lying in the solar plexus, along the arms, along the legs, forcing it into fingertips and feet, forcing it out so that her dancers sweat tongues of flame. To her dancers she says, 'Through the body, the body is conquered.' [...] She spins them [...] until all features are blurred, until the human being most resembles a freed spirit from a darkened jar. One after the other she spins them, like a juggler keeping plates on sticks; one after the other she runs up and down the line as one slows or another threatens to fall from dizziness. [...] The polished wooden floor glows with the heat of their bodies, and one by one they crumble over and lie exhausted on the ground. Fortunata refreshes them and the dance begins again.* (Winterson 1990, 72)[94]

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[94] Frederic Regard has written an insightful article which closely reads this italicized page. Although he pays close attention to the reader, Regard does not concentrate on the dance, but uses whirling signifiers

When her pupils have learned to dance, literally to spin around in all aspects of their lives, they leave the school like 'butterflies'. Having metamorphosed into something different, and shown the ability to adapt and change, the pupils are light as butterflies, flitting from one position to the next. They learn not to view their bodies as physical burdens or separate from their minds; their dance manifests the combination of mind and body.[95] The opposition between space and matter is deconstructed while they spin, inviting a different perspective on bodies as made up of empty space and points of light, and challenging culture's emphasis on the materiality of the female body in an effort to essentialise 'woman'.[96]

Just as the opposition between mind and body is deconstructed in the dance, so too is the boundary between presence and absence. This section, which describes the dancing school is italicised, a convention traditionally employed either to emphasise part of a sentence or to signal a word's foreign origins to the reader. In this case, 'Fortunata's coming to presence is both stressed and, so to speak, alienated. [...] Her presence is an absence' (Regard, 2003, 118). The very visual effect of the italics also means that 'words gesture towards other words: one sloping signifier calls for the next, or preceding, sloping signifier' signalling 'the text's metonymic deferral of the beginning and of the end' (Regard 2003, 118-119). Meaning is deferred and

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as tropes for magic. The whirls are magical utterances, beyond metaphysics, which are 'immediately performative: the gap between word and world, or fiction and fact, is bridged without delay' (2003, 115). A whirl, according to Regard, is a trope for magic as it turns 'swiftly upon itself, spinning round and round, escaping fixed places, in a confused state, at a dizzying speed' (2003, 115). In a series of arguments, it is suggested that magic 'stands against a fixed order in order to reenergize other ways of being', it questions the distribution of roles, engaging 'a redefinition of the self that is at odds with the traditional Western conception of identity' (2003, 116).

[95] I would therefore disagree with Jeffrey Roessner, who argues that the dance of Fortunata's pupils demonstrates an 'urge to transcend the physical limitations of the self' (2002, 109). This dance recalls the tale of the eleventh princess, whose husband describes his body as 'a black tower where wild beasts live' (Winterson 1990, 59). His despair ends when, at his request, his wife smashes his skull and drags his body into the air where 'he flew away'; his spirit is freed from bodily shackles, but only in death. The notion that mind and body are separate, and the husband's inability to reconcile the two, leads to misery; however, it has been shown by the princesses, and Fortunata's dancing pupils, that each jubilantly invades the other.

[96] Regard offers some insightful comments on the importance of light in this section, noting that the dancers are not individual, absolute sources of light, but light is radiated, rather, by their bodies being linked. This challenges light as 'conceived in terms of an original, absolute beginning—as would be the case in a patriarchal system entirely centered on an invisible God whose metaphor would be the sun; it seems to be conceived [instead] in terms of a disseminated energy' (Regard 2003, 122).

disseminated also in the text's intertexts: '*the fiery furnace*' and '*tongues of flame*' call

to mind religious and mystical texts, and the references to the '*wild gyration*' of the

dancers and '*the solar plexus*', Regard notes, refer the reader to the texts of W.B Yeats

and D.H Lawrence (2003, 120). The reader is invited to partake in making the meanings

of the text, to try to connect the intertexts to the narrative, and yet to accept that

meaning is infinitely disseminated. The text re-reads past canonical texts but

fundamentally re-writes them; this draws readers in and invites them to participate in a

dialogue between present and past cultural contexts. The text ask '*how else can we

account for so many of us who disappear?*', interpellating readers directly and inviting

them to consider the ideas it promotes, such as dancing subjectivity and a

reconsideration of meanings (Winterson 1990, 72).[97] The dance of the pupils cannot be

separated from the dancing text; they embody 'the energy of meaning-making' and the

text therefore suggests the 'transfiguration of the body into a style, from the Latin

"stilus", i.e., a pointed instrument, used here for recording the force of becoming other,

[...] of constantly looking for a new ground' (Regard 2003, 123).

This dancing text offers multiple subjectivities for consideration; it is ultimately

unstable and does not offer readers positions of knowledge or certainty. It makes

suggestions, but does not offer an ideal position from which to be read, or offer readers

a particular path to adhere to. Fortunata is a teacher, but her position is not one of

authority used to place her students in positions of knowledge; rather, unlike the

omniscient narrator of realist fiction, who is set up as an authority, she offers positions

of instability to her students. Fortunata occupies a position characterised by hybridity,

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[97] Regard asserts that 'the text obviously posits the existence of a subject of the enunciation interpellating another subject belonging to the same community' as the word 'we' is used in the question it asks (2003, 121). Although Regard notes that the text abdicates the 'reader's position as a firm centre of knowledge', he states that the reader is 'forced to participate in the making of the text'; this notion is at odds with my approach to textuality, as meaning is multiple and the reader cannot be 'forced' to do anything by a text (2003, 122).

flexibility and plurality; aware of the restrictions placed upon her, she has danced beyond them and has set off a following in doing so.

Sexing the Cherry asks the reader to dance new steps which diverge from patterned ones, to forge a path which is uncharted and unknown, where meanings are unstable and have not been mapped in advance to be taken for granted. It suggests that although the world may appear to be known to us, there are other journeys to be made. In Jordan's journeys of the imagination, the notion of what maps are for is challenged and their colonial implications highlighted, not only in historical and geographical terms, but also as a comment on the colonising of meanings. New journeys can be pursued not in a colonising spirit, to own, categorise and stabilise things, places and people, but in a spirit of curiosity, where new discoveries and new approaches might allow for changes to be implemented in culture. When Jordan sails away from Fortunata, he knows that he will not find her again, because 'she will elude me, she and this island will slip sideways in time and I'll never find them again' (Winterson 1990, 103). As he begins to row, he uses her body as a 'marker', and believes that he always will (Winterson 1990, 103). What better body to use as a marker for one's journey in life than one which twists, turns and leaps at will?

Jordan spends a month with Fortunata, during which she tells him 'that for years she had lived in hope of being rescued; of belonging to someone else, of dancing together. And then she had learned to dance alone, for its own sake and for hers' (Winterson 1990, 99). The 'original' Grimm tale rejects dancing as an activity which promotes matrimony. Fortunata has learned to dance for her own sake, and consequently, when Jordan asks her to leave with him, she refuses, which is also a refusal to provide closure to his story. Jordan's voyage of discovery refers the reader to quest narratives. In medieval chivalric romances, the 'hero's life was narrativized into a quest. [...] These wish-fulfilment tales, with their strongly fantastical vein, are

powerfully masculine narratives, and provide a sequential model of an idealised

masculine life' (Benson 1996, 105). Jordan wants to be a hero like Tradescant, who has

travelled to the New World and returned with exotic plants. In an era of emerging

British imperialism, heroism is linked with discovery and colonialism. The text also

calls upon the hero of the eighteenth-century novel, who 'is brave and adventurous, he

travels in the wider world, he takes charge of his own destiny and he is powerful. He

earns his own living and often makes an enormous fortune, returning home a wealthy

and successful man to claim the woman of his choice' (Gregory 1996, 139).

Jordan's story undermines the style and ideology of traditional quest narratives.

When he sees Fortunata she is 'a woman whose face was a sea voyage [he] had not the

courage to attempt' (Winterson 1990, 21); like Helen of Troy, whose face launched a

thousand ships, she becomes the fixed point for his heroic adventures (Farwell 1996,

181). Although Jordan is compared to Odysseus, and Fortunata to Helen, in this story

Jordan cannot 'claim the woman of his choice' and his quest is not for riches or land,

but for his 'self'. Although he refers to Fortunata as 'the destination of [his] heart', he

soon asks himself, 'was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I

searching for the dancing part of myself?' (Winterson 1990 38, 40). Whether searching

for someone else to make him whole, or searching for his 'true' identity, Jordan finds

neither, exchanging the characteristic endings of quest narratives and love stories for an

'ending' which encourages dancing subjectivity and eschews closure.

Fortunata does not provide closure to Jordan's quest, and the love story that is

hinted at does not end conventionally. Traditional romance fiction offers readers a

gradually developing relationship which climaxes at the end, usually in marriage. Just

like the reader of classic realist fiction, the reader of romance fiction has 'the desire for

an uncluttered, smooth path from beginning to end', which is 'matched by the desire of

the reader to be fully satisfied by the ordered fulfilment of an already known outline of

events' (Benson 1996, 103). The text, it might be argued, keeps the reader's satisfaction endlessly deferred by keeping desire intact and not concluding it.[98]

Seventeeth-Century Sisterhood

Although Jordan meets the princesses in his 'travels of the mind', his basis in seventeenth-century London invites the reader to connect their tales to that setting and women's positions in that culture. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men and women could gather together to hear and tell fairy tales; the setting granted women the 'opportunity to talk—to preach—which was forbidden them in other situations, the pulpit, the forum, and frowned on and feared in the spinning rooms and by the wellside' (Warner 1994, 22). The fact that the princesses' house is an all-female space presents a two-fold challenge to restrictions on women's 'rattling tongues' in seventeenth-century England, where 'the places where women gathered alone often offered dangerous freedom [...] in the lively exchange of news and gossip' (Warner 1994, 40). The princesses' house is a space of resistance, where they can voice opinions, tell stories, and live with lovers. They remind the reader of the restrictions placed on women's speech at a time when the silent woman was the ideal, but also signal towards the 'outbreak of feminist argument' yet to come at the end of the seventeenth century, in which 'the right of women to voice their opinions was at the centre of the struggle' (Warner 1994, 29). Women's speech may have been considered irreverent and irrelevant 'prattle' and 'gossip' in the seventeenth century, but on Jordan's fictional

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[98] Jeffrey Roessner notes that although the text resists the usual ending of traditional, patriarchal plot lines, which end in marriage as resolution, it can also be seen as playing on 'another very traditional plot line, one that ends with unrequited love and relies on a spiritual figure such as Beatrice, the woman who initially motivates Dante's quest, who can never be attained but who nonetheless sustains his journey to self-knowledge'. Roessner sees this as perpetuating 'the mythic use of the desirable woman as an Other to masculine rationality' (2002, 115). I would argue that the text does not signal that either Jordan or Fortunata's 'love' is unrequited, and prefer to read the 'ending' of their story as a perpetuation rather than closing off of desire. It should also be pointed out that although Fortunata may 'initially motivate' Jordan's quest, he does not ultimately attain 'self-knowledge' or the liberal-humanist identity implicated in this term.

travels at this time, the women he meets speak not only to empower themselves, but also to tell the tales of their empowerment; a dangerous and exciting step to take, which has the potential to set off a following.

The partial setting of the novel in seventeenth-century London is also significant in a consideration of women's subjectivity. The general social and political turmoil in England at that time created a favourable setting for questioning traditional ideals and allowed popular ideas and discontents to come to light. The text explores issues such as the development of the liberal humanist subject, the beginnings of modern feminism, and the role of women in marriage. Parts of the novel are set between 1641 and 1661, with particular emphasis on the tumultuous year of 1649, during which Charles I was tried and executed. The destruction of social norms served as the vehicle for female 'emancipation' at this time. Like *The Dancers Dancing*, which addresses current issues in a fiction about the past, *Sexing the Cherry* invokes a more distant, but formative, history to consider questions pertinent in the present.

Female subjectivity in the seventeenth century is a complex issue, and is further complicated by the contradictions inherent in many feminist texts of the moment. In the seventeenth century, political and social upheaval combined with advances in art, science and industry contributed to the development of the liberal-humanist subject. A decrease in the authority of the Church, an increase in the authority of science, and the regicide of Charles I all played a role in the formation of the unique, autonomous individual. Developments in science changed the place of the subject in the universe; Copernican theory, finally taken note of in the seventeenth century, dethroned the earth from its geometrical pre-eminence, making it difficult to give man the cosmic importance assigned to him in Christian theology. In the medieval period the dominant institution was the Church, the earth was thought to be at the centre of the heavens, and the Christian subject had a God-given place in society. Modernity, however, placed

man, not God, at the centre of the world. With developments in science came a critical shift, which encouraged the use of reason and scientific objectivity and disregarded mysticism and magic. Following Descartes, thinkers such as Bacon and Locke wrote of the autonomous human subject as the origin and guarantor of meanings. At the root of liberal humanism was the notion of freedom, which set in motion the desire to freely choose political representatives in the form of a democratic political system: a wish which was fulfilled after the execution of Charles I. The ideal of progress and human liberation was to be achieved by using reason, logic, and the pursuit of individual excellence. All men were born equal. But where did women figure in this new form of subjectivity?

The liberal humanist subject was considered to be the origin of meanings, a unique being, sharing an essential core of humanity with all other subjects. It is primarily in the seventeenth-century institution of marriage that women's exclusion from this form of subjectivity becomes evident. Since the Middle Ages, the Church had fought to control marriage in an effort to regulate sexuality. It had been mostly a class-based property contract in which parents chose spouses for their children.[99] In the seventeenth century, however, the Puritans, especially, encouraged a view of marriage as a monogamous relationship of respect and love designed for the procreation of children.[100] They stressed the equality of husband and wife, emphasising, however, the obedience expected from wives.

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[99] In the tale of the tenth princess, marriage as a property-contract is called attention to; the princess is treated as property by her husband, who made her feel like 'the fence which needed to be replaced' (Winterson 1990, 57). When he has an affair, it is she who must leave her home and property, recalling women's property rights, or lack of, in the seventeenth century. Unlike women who made themselves homeless for love, like, 'Medea [...] and Romeo and Juliet, and Cressida, and Ruth in the Bible', the princess's husband will not forfeit his property (Winterson 1990, 58). Alerting the reader to the influence of art on life, it is the princess who must surrender her home. In a new move, though, the novel does not leave the princess displaced, but relocates her in a community of sisterhood.

[100] In the tale of the fourth princess, an adulterous husband's sexual exploits are juxtaposed with the princess's investment in romantic love, idealised here as a commitment in a monogomous relationship. She wonders why he could not commit to her 'as trees though troubled by the wind yet continue in the path of the sun' (Winterson 1990, 51). Adultery is portrayed as resulting in unhappiness and heart-break, while love is presented as necessary to happiness: 'I wanted to love him; I was determined to be happy

Women's position within the institution of marriage was a central concern for seventeenth-century women writers. This historical period marked a transition from the absolutist concept of marriage, in which women functioned as objects of exchange, to the liberal concept, which saw marriage as a union based on mutual consent. This new ideal, however, still granted women little real choice of partners, and did not truly challenge the legal view of marriage as the absorption of a wife's identity into that of her husband. In marriage, women had to forfeit any claims to an identity separate from their husbands. Even their subordination to their husbands was less important than their loyalty and obedience to two other male authority figures: the king and God. Wifely submission could not easily be combined with the new liberal ideas of marriage as a union of mutual consent. This is the contradictory subject position which women were faced with. It is evident that the new free, rational, individual liberal humanist subject was male.

Arranged marriages are explored in the story of the twelve dancing princesses, each of whom is promised in marriage to a prince by their father. Romantic love inside marriage, or a monogamous relationship, was a novel idea in social practice in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the Puritans had their work cut out to control desire. In her church, the Dog-Woman notices 'illegitimate' pregnancy amongst several of the parishioners: 'We file past every Sunday to humble ourselves and stay clean for another week, but I have noticed a bulge here and there where all should have been quiet and God-like' (Winterson 1990, 34). Much earlier in the text, she goes to see the banana to be presented by Johnson, but notes that the herbalist was known for other things: 'When a woman found herself too round for her liking and showing no blood by the moon, it was Johnson she visited with only a lantern for company' (Winterson 1990, 11). The attitude of religious institutions to sexuality outside matrimony was strongly repressive,

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with him. I had not been happy before' (Winterson 1990, 51). In this tale, which gestures to 'Bluebeard', adultery is not avenged and a fortune inherited, but is instead questioned in disappointed tones.

but illegitimacy rates were relatively high for the first half of the seventeenth century, many of them lowered by 'infanticide, abortion, subterfuge, and flight' (Malekin 1981, 132). It is evident that not all women adhered to the dominant subject position offered to them by patriarchal institutions, but found grounds for resistance, having affairs outside of marriage and making decisions by themselves.

Alternatives to marriage and liberal humanist subjectivity are envisioned in *Sexing the Cherry*. There are echoes of the importance of the notion of sisterhood for seventeenth-century feminist writers in the all-female communities formed in the novel.[101] *Sexing the Cherry* incorporates previous literature and rewrites it to produce a new result. Not only does the text bring to life characters from the past, but the 'decaying bodies' of past texts are also brought to life and rewritten (Winterson 1990, 126). Like *The Dancers Dancing*, the novel practises a 'constant dialogue with the preceding literary corpus, a perpetual challenge of past writing' by echoing the writings of seventeenth-century feminists throughout (Kristeva 1980c, 69).

All-female communities were envisioned, written about, and often actually formed, as a space in which women could assert choice and freedom in the seventeenth century. The text tells of the princesses who run away from their husbands to live together, some with their female lovers. It tells of Artemis and her sisters and also recounts the tale of the prostitutes whom Jordan visits dressed as a woman. The prostitutes are locked into their brothel every night, but a stream that runs beneath it brings them to the cellars of the Convent of the Holy Mother. Jordan explains:

> Some of the women had lovers in the convent; others, keeping a change of
>
> clothes there, went their way in the outside world. [...] Some years later I heard
>
> that [their owner] had come into his pleasure chamber one day and found it

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[101] Gonzalez-Abalos notes that although sisterhood was important in the feminist movement in the 1970s as a way of defining and strengthening women, the concept has since been challenged and overtaken by a concern with differences in race, class, sexuality, and so on. Nonetheless, Gonzalez-Abalos reads *Sexing the Cherry*'s imaginary sisterhoods as representing a specifically lesbian concern with 'woman-identification not originated by a feeling of shared victimization' (1996, 288).

absolutely empty of women and of treasures. He never fathomed the matter and

made no connection between that event and the sudden increase in novitiates at

the Convent of the Holy Mother. (Winterson 1990, 31)

This episode inverts power relations in the brothel when the prostitutes outwit their

'owner'. It suggests sisterhood in the form of the convent, but also an overarching

sisterhood between women, because although prostitutes and nuns are perceived to

occupy opposite ends of a sexual 'morality' spectrum, they prefer each other's company

to men's. The nuns and prostitutes who become lovers also resist heterosexuality.

Possibly influenced by the feminocentric court culture of Henrietta Maria, many

seventeenth-century women writers such as Margaret Cavendish, Mary Wroth, and

Mary Astell wrote about all-female spaces. In *The Female Academy* in 1662 and *The*

Convent of Pleasure in 1668 Cavendish employs separatist spaces to empower women

by challenging the male gaze and replacing it with a mutually supportive gaze between

women (D'Monté 2000, 93). *The Female Academy* is made up of unmarried women

who enter 'a House wherein a company of young Ladies are instructed by old Matrons;

as to speak wittily and rationally, and to behave themselves handsomly, and to live

virtuously' (Cavendish 1662, 653). *The Convent of Pleasure* is a drama which tells the

story of Lady Happy, who withdraws from male society into an all-female space. The

convent is infiltrated by a prince dressed as a woman, much like Jordan when he cross-

dresses to visit the prostitutes in their brothel. Both male characters are given an

opportunity to see things from a woman's perspective, thus subverting the male gaze.

This play's avowal of lesbianism is subtle, though quite revolutionary in a piece written

at the time. Both texts suggest a space where love can exist without the subordination of

one partner to another. The fact that this space is an all-female one is a direct comment

on women's dislike of their subordinate position in the marriage contract and in

patriarchal society in general.

These seventeenth-century writers were also concerned with the issue of women's education. The Dog-Woman openly admits that she has not had much education: 'As far as I know it, and I have only a little learning, the King had been forced to call a Parliament to grant him money for his war against the kilted beasts and their savage ways' (Winterson 1990, 26). Only upper class women had any access to education, and then only to the type deemed suitable for training them in their expected roles as wives and mothers. As women were denied the same education as men, many female writers such as Anna Maria von Schurman, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Astell took up the issue of social reform and women's education. The liberal humanist subject was to use reason, logic, and understanding in order to progress; women argued that they should have access to an equal education if they were to promote the interests of society. This, however, was an unpopular idea with men, as women's egalitarian education would threaten hegemonic gender structures in their society (Pohl 2000, 151).

In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, anonymously published in two parts in 1694 and 1697, Mary Astell argues for a religious retreat where women could gain an education, and, fundamentally, leave whenever they wished. Nicole Pohl notes that 'the polemical argument presented by Mary Astell [...] implies that the withdrawal of women is the ultimate fulfilment of themselves and conclusively denies the possibility of selfhood and happiness in the men's world' (2000, 153-154). Secular convents were often taken as the starting point for envisioning a space for women's education. After Henry VIII suppressed religious communities in the sixteenth century, they began to be re-established in the next century, with the help of Henrietta Maria, who set up an order of nuns at Chaillot in 1651. They were the only institutions that offered education and guidance to women. In *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), Astell argues that in marriage, a woman is subordinate to her husband as a civic duty, and educating women might redefine this hierarchy. Astell foregrounds female friendships as the ultimate

space for female emancipation, as the women are not subordinate to one another and need not submit to outside control. Her choice of a religious retreat as a place to achieve this is echoed in *Sexing the Cherry* in the Convent of the Holy Mother. Astell's concern for women's right to an equal education is rewritten in the idea of Fortunata's dancing school. This is an education which is not equal to that of men, since that would be based on patriarchal foundations, but goes one step further; it is designed to help students to turn themselves into points of light, that is, to dance. Whereas seventeenth-century women argued for equal education in order to achieve the emancipation of the liberal humanist subject, Fortunata's pupils learn that subjectivity is not single, but multiple. *Sexing the Cherry*'s intertextual references to seventeenth-century women's writings, as well as its reconfiguration of fairy-tales, offer a textual space in which social change might be envisioned. Much like seventeenth-century feminist texts, the novel offers resistant discourses to feminist readers and encourages the formation of new positions.

Love, Sex, Gender

In the story of Jordan and Fortunata, the text calls on romance fiction, quest narratives and medieval love stories. In this postmodern text, 'the vocabulary of desire shifts as alternative traditions come into view and new sources are appropriated and adapted'; the text 'foregrounds the citationality of desire, affirms it, puts it on display' (Belsey 1994, 82). Love, like beauty, cites in order to renew itself. As Barthes points out:

> the declaration of love (a banal, *already written* sequence, if ever there was one) merely alternates an assertion (*I love you*) and a disclaimer (*do not love me*). [...] Variation results from the poverty of terms (there are only two), which requires finding for each of them a whole list of different signifiers' (1990, 176-77).

The subject of love has been verbalized so extensively and repeatedly in culture that it is almost impossible to write anything new about the experience. The text, though, finds 'a whole list of different signifiers' to refer to the experience; it takes up old texts and clichéd narratives and reinvigorates them. Although the text criticises marriage, it sets up 'true love' as an alternative goal.

On his travels, Jordan visits a city whose entire population had been wiped out three times by love. Love is figured as a sickness: an epidemic with the power to eradicate a city. Two survivors of the plague, a monk and a whore, repopulate the city and outlaw love: 'From their earliest moment children were warned of the dire consequences, personal and social, of love. They were urged to put aside any romantic fancies, the sexes were carefully segregated and all marriages were arranged' (Winterson 1990, 75). This city's rules are remarkably similar to the text's parody of Puritan views on marriage in seventeenth-century England. In the end, Jordan reintroduces love to the city by singing for the inhabitants; given a choice of death or love, they all choose love, except for the monk and the whore, who are left to repopulate the city once more. Evidently the two are unaffected by love and symbolise marriage as a contract for procreation, much as it was seen in the middle ages. The text pokes fun at them, showing their efforts to eradicate love to be futile: 'The monk and the whore shot them all and found themselves alone. They would have to begin again. Wearily they climbed into bed' (Winterson 1990, 78).

Parts of *Sexing the Cherry* give the impression that love is part of the 'human condition'; this seems to conform to liberal-humanist subjectivity, which claims that we are all unique but share an essential core of being. Love seems to be at the heart of this essential core here. However, at the same time, the text parodies particular fictional representations of romantic love, and invites readers to consider the influence such fictions can have on subjectivity as well as pointing to the citationality of romance. The

Dog-Woman constantly longs for an ideal romantic partner and is the locus of romantic

discourses from the literature of the middle ages and Renaissance period. She tells of

the boy she loved as a young girl, and her disappointment when he fainted as she

offered him a kiss: "'What is it?" I cried. "Is it love for me that affects you so?" "No,"

he said. It is terror."' (Winterson 1990, 36). This episode is reminiscent of Dante's 'La

Vita Nuova' in which the hero feels sick when he catches sight of his beloved; he

cannot speak, grows pale and almost faints. The Dog-Woman's recollection parodies

literary representations of love as sickness, and at the same time points to textual

influences on her perception of what love should be. She also relates her efforts to

impress the boy by washing herself: 'I hate to wash, but knowing it to be a symptom of

love I was not surprised to find myself creeping towards the pump in the dead of night

like a ghoul to a tomb' (Winterson 1990, 35). Using language with medical and

scientific connotations to describe her reaction to the boy, the Dog-Woman literalises

the notion of love as sickness, washing herself because she believes it to be a 'symptom'

of love.

> Even so, the Dog-Woman dreams of love:
>
> I have no vanity but I would enjoy the consolation of a lover's face. After my
>
> only excursion into love I resolved never to make a fool of myself again. I was
>
> offered a job in a whore-house but I turned it down on account of my frailty of
>
> heart. [...] For lust without romantic matter must be wearisome after a time. I
>
> asked a girl at the Spitalfields house about it and she told me she hates her
>
> lovers-by-the-hour but still longs for someone to come in a coach and feed her
>
> on mince-pies. Where do they come from, these insubstantial dreams?
>
> (Winterson 1990, 40)

The text itself answers this question. These 'insubstantial dreams' come partly from

literary discourses that propose that there is such a thing as a knight on a white horse

who will rescue and love a princess, or a man in a coach who will feed a lady with mince pies. The contradiction between the men the prostitute meets and her ideal man is obvious, yet she still clings to a dream; dreams of certain types of love and longings for it, we are invited to notice, are created in fiction. The text ultimately suggests that patriarchal marriage kills romance and love, and is quite sceptical about whether 'real love' can be found in the terms that romantic fiction suggests. It nevertheless sets up a sort of ideal 'true love' that can exist outside of marriage, as in the case of some of the princesses, who live 'happily ever after [...] but not with [their] husbands' (Winterson 1990, 48).

The text is not sceptical about monogamous, lifelong partnerships, but about the patriarchal marriage contract as formulated by the Church to control desire, and as a property contract, as encouraged by the aristocracy. Even the Dog-Woman's modern counterpart rejects the notion that marriage could make her happy: 'When I'm dreaming I want a home and a lover and some children, but it won't work' (Winterson 1990, 127). The dancing princesses, Artemis and her sisters, and the prostitutes resist the dominant subject position offered to them by the patriarchal institutions dominating society. They assume resistant subject positions, showing that even a powerful discourse can be opposed. A discourse, or knowledge, is never stable; it contains traces of other discourses in it and retains its meaning only by its difference from those. In the text, 'true love' can only survive outside of marriage; all the female characters avoid the subordinate position of married women.

The seventeenth century marked a crucial turning point in European attitudes to love, when the exalted love stories of the twelfth-century Troubadours, previously mocked and cynically turned into clichés in the sixteenth century, began to be applied to the everyday relationships of men and women. People began to see the possibility of romantic love in marriage, which was played out in the literature of the time.

Witnessing this in art and literature may have provided more of an outlet for fantasies than a real challenge to the social system though. Even dramas like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which did not end happily, still promoted love as an ideal state. Happy love, after all, has no history: 'Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself. [...] And passion means suffering. There we have the fundamental fact' (Rougemont 1983, 15). Shakespeare, amongst others, domesticated love, connecting it with courtship, in comparison with medieval texts, which often placed love outside of marriage. *Sexing the Cherry* challenges the seventeenth-century domestication of love by suggesting that it can survive only outside of marriage.

The tale of the seventh princess critiques the institution of marriage. Its focus is not primarily on feelings and emotions, but on physical love and the importance of the body in a relationship, challenging the repression of sexuality and the restriction of sex to procreation. The language used in this tale sharply contrasts with traditional expressions of love in fairy tales and romantic literature; it is passionate and physiological: 'I wanted to pioneer the secret passage of her arse'; 'we kissed often, our mouths filling up with tongue and teeth and spit and blood' (Winterson 1990, 54). Such phrases, juxtaposed with sensuous, poetic language elsewhere in the tale, attack regular fairytale etiquette and unsettle the reader. Erotic language is unexpected from princesses, who, like all fairytale heroines, were 'gradually made [...] more polite, well-spoken, or even silent, from one edition to the next' in the Grimms' nineteenth-century publications (Warner 1994, 281). The love of a princess is strictly reserved for princes and ultimately confirmed in marriage; sexuality is never explicitly mentioned in fairy tales; it would not only be deemed inappropriate in the genre, but the heterosexuality of all characters is always implicit in any case.

The princess's articulation of the physicality of sex also challenges women's conventional positions as passive recipients of sexual desire.[102] The text confronts the way women's desire is often constructed in signifying practices which keep intact male privilege, and does not offer it as a receptacle for male fantasies. Passionate descriptions of bodies and sexuality in a romantic tale invite readers to question whether sexuality might often be excluded from much traditional literature in an effort to control and dictate what is 'acceptable' in such contexts.[103] In this tale, the discourses of romance and eroticism are interwoven, not kept apart. Perhaps culture has tried to separate the two in the same way as it has set up a binary opposition between the sexes.

In fairy tales the heterosexual monogamous couple is projected as the norm and as a moral standard, while other forms of sexuality are defined as unnatural and even a danger to society. When people come to burn the princess's lover, society turns on a lesbian couple and demonizes them, inviting the reader to consider the treatment of homosexuals and the naturalization of heterosexuality in contemporary culture. Patriarchal marriage and heterosexuality are challenged throughout the princesses' tales, as some of them fall in love with women, some with men, and some choose to live alone. In a house shared by women, heterosexual union is shown to be only one option of many as a way to live.[104] Homosexuality is not named or labelled as such in the tales; it is not differentiated from heterosexuality, and neither heterosexual nor homosexual relationships are privileged.

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[102] Although it might be argued that the princess's description of her lover in physical and sexual terms stages a repetition of women's sexual objectification, the description of the lovers as one rather than two beings counters this notion; 'There was no separation between us. We rose in the morning and slept at night as twins do. We had four arms and four legs' (Winterson 1990, 54).

[103] Christy L. Burns reads this passage as an effort to use sensuous language which 'exceeds rational meaning' and tries to 'seduce readers toward change rather than commanding or instructing them' (1996, 294).

[104] Gonzalez-Abalos argues that the text 'shows heterosexuality as having been enforced upon women as one of the most effective means of male patriarchal oppression' and that 'by denying male sexual definition, by identifying only with women, women will be able to discover their own true nature, as opposed to the male-defined roles and behaviour patterns imposed on them for centuries' (1996, 290-291). I would argue that the text denaturalises heterosexuality as normative, but disagree that it has been 'enforced' on women by patriarchy; I would also assert that the text does not privilege either hetero- or homo-sexuality and am wary of Gonzalez-Abalos's suggestion that women have a 'true nature'.

The princess tells of the happiness she experiences with her lover until 'someone found us and then it was too late. The man I had married was a woman' (Winterson 1990, 54). This calls to mind Lady Happy's love for a princess in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*, which is unproblematic until it is discovered that the princess is really a prince. The seventh princess and her lover deviate from what Judith Butler terms the 'heterosexual matrix', that is, 'a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality' (1999, 42). In an effort to repress ambiguous and incoherent genders and sexualities, culture dictates that gendered behaviour should match anatomical sex, and that sexual desire should be directed only at the opposite sex. This cultural matrix 'requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender' (Butler 1999, 23-24). The couple's deviation from hegemonic cultural expectations results in their vilification; it turns out that one of them must literally cease to 'exist' in order for culture to uphold its constructions. The princess heroically kills her lover before society can take revenge: 'I killed her with a single blow to the head before they reached the gates' (Winterson 1990, 54).[105] Challenging the heterosexual matrix, the lovers encounter tragedy, but nevertheless extend the boundaries of what is culturally intelligible (Butler 1999, 39). Intelligible genders adhere to the heterosexual matrix and are based on the assumption that bodies 'naturally' behave in certain ways and have certain desires. Discontinuous and incoherent genders are prohibited and condemned within traditional culture and are seen as failures or aberrations from the norm.

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[105] Gonzalez-Abalos suggests that this is the only successful love/sex relationship portrayed in *Sexing the Cherry*, despite its tragic end (1996, 289). I would argue that it is not 'successful' precisely because of its basis in a patriarchal contract. A 'successful' relationship in the text, by contrast, might be that of the eldest princess and the mermaid.

However, such bodies allow us to question the limits of traditional ideas about gender and the heterosexual matrix, as they exceed it and expose its limits (Butler 1999, 24).[106]

Sexing the Cherry was first published in 1989, Gender Trouble in 1990. That neither can have influenced the other only makes the parallels more striking. Throughout the text, Sexing the Cherry invites readers not only to challenge the privileging of the heterosexual, patriarchal institution of marriage, but also to denaturalise the 'natural' link between sex and gender. The fruit icons that precede individual sections of Sexing the Cherry introduce narrators.[107] For the passages set in the seventeenth century, the Dog-Woman's narration is signalled by a banana, while Jordan's are indicated by a pineapple. The twentieth-century sections, meanwhile, use a peeled and sliced banana to signal the voice of an unnamed environmentalist woman, while a pineapple split into halves denotes the narration of Nicholas Jordan. The fruits are linked elsewhere in the text to Enlightenment values of colonial exploration and scientific progress: Jordan's sight of the first banana brought to England spurs him on his journeys of discovery, from which he finally returns with the first pineapple to be seen in the Old World. Their function as indicators of narrators' identities, however, turns away from Enlightenment values of stability, identity and categorisation; the phallic banana is associated with a female character, and the more feminized pineapple with a male character, thus challenging conventional gendered expectations and highlighting the artificial construction of such values.[108] Moreover, even objects such as fruit, which have their basis in nature, are read through the lens of culture; the meanings of 'natural' objects, and even nature itself are formed in culture. The icons point to

[106] Laura Doan reads this tale as a reconceptualization of 'normal' unions; it does not obviously transgress, but rather appropriates the terms that legitimize heterosexual union and posits 'merely innocent switch of the acceptable terms and conditions of that contract' (1994, 138).
[107] With the exception of the italicised page describing Fortunata's dance school (Winterson 1990, 72).
[108] The banana was explicitly sexualised in the early twentieth century, as a conventional sign of male gender. It 'presents as natural, universal and timeless a compact of meanings that have been laid down over the centuries', one of which is its 'seemingly natural link to sex, [which] has focused the fruit's modern Western meaning around issues of male performance and potency (Warner 1998, 357).

culture's meaning-making processes as founded on binary logic, and then reverse those meanings.

Although the icons are unexpectedly attributed to the sexes with whom they are not traditionally associated, they still serve their purpose in the text, clearly identifying who is speaking, demonstrating that readers can become accustomed to new meanings. Critics have argued that the fruit icons' associations with gender deconstruct the natural link between sex and gender, but I would argue that they amount to an inversion, or reversal of this link rather than subversion, or deconstruction; to deconstruct, after all, is to point out the invasion of the other into selfsame in a binary opposition.[109] The icons highlight and reverse cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity; however, the references to another type of fruit, the cherry, take this reversal one step further.

Jordan learns the art of grafting the cherry from Tradescant and makes 'a yield between a Polstead Black and a Morello', making a tree that 'would still be female although it had not been born from seed' (Winterson 1990, 78-79). While Jordan wonders if it might be an art that he could apply to himself, the conservative Dog-Woman considers the hybridised cherry tree to be a monster, and such things 'a confusion to themselves' (Winterson 1990, 79). The Dog-Woman, concerned with maintaining binary oppositions and keeping intact what nature intended, stands in opposition to Jordan's proposal that hybridity might be a more useful way of looking at gender. Asexual grafting joins plant parts together to be grown as one plant, typically to create a stronger strain. Here the metaphor challenges the dualisms on which Western metaphysical logic is premised.[110] Grafting represents a model of creation outside of heterosexuality and produces a different strain to its precursors. It renders stable gender

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[109] Jana L. French (1999, 243) and Bente Gade (1999, 246) state that the fruit icons deconstruct the normative equation between sex and gender. Laura Doan, on the other hand, argues that the reversal of the fruits, 'in light of our cultural immersion in Freudian symbolism' gestures toward an 'exploration of the ideology of gender' and does not claim that it constitutes a deconstruction (1994, 150).

[110] Gonzalez-Abalos links the grafting technique to the seventh princess, who tells that 'the man I had married was a woman' (Winterson 1990, 54). She asserts that the reader is presented with the fusion of two women to produce a third kind of relationship, and that relationships between women are thus a 'way out of women's apparent dependence on men' (1996, 289).

identities problematic and points to their cultural construction, suggesting a hybrid

being which is neither purely masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. It

also signals a hope for dissemination of gender identities, similar to that suggested by

Derrida in 'Choreographies': not an androgynous neutralization of gender difference,

but a multiplicity without duality, beyond binary difference. Laura Doan notes that the

metaphor of grafting hardly constitutes a grand strategy for undermining repressive

hegemonies, but nevertheless may 'call certain conceptual underpinnings into question

and thereby break down restrictive parameters of the unimaginable' (Doan 1994,

153).[111]

Jordan's cross-dressing further destabilizes the 'natural' link between sex and

gender. During his search for Fortunata, he is advised to disguise himself as a woman

by the prostitutes he visits in a brothel: 'I did as they advised and came to them in a

simple costume hired for the day. They praised my outfit and made me blush by

stroking my cheek and commenting on its smoothness' (Winterson 1990, 30).

Afterwards, having decided to continue as a woman for a while and work at a fish stall,

Jordan discovers that 'women have a private language. A language not dependent on the

constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary

words as code-words meaning something other' (Winterson 1990, 31). Nevertheless, the

woman who owns the fish stall does not notice that his feminine garb does not tally with

his sex, confirming that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated

acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the

appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1999, 43-44). He also cross-

dresses at King Charles' Trial: 'Tradescant and Jordan dressed themselves as drabs,

with painted faces and scarlet lips and dresses that looked as though they'd been pawed

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[111] For a discussion of destabilisation of identity, sex and gender in *Sexing the Cherry* informed by Judith Butler see Bente Gade (1999). Laura Doan also offers a reading of the novel as a fictional counterpart of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and discusses the positive links between postmodernism and feminism (a specifically lesbian feminism) (1994).

over by every infantryman in the capital. Jordan had a fine mincing walk and a leer that got him a good few offers of a bed for the night' (Winterson 1990, 68). Jordan's treatment by passers-by at the King's trial, as well as the fish-stall owner's assumption that he is female, demonstrate that masculinity and femininity are not natural behaviours that result from a sexed body, but rather are acted out: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1999, 33). Jordan's cross-dressing, or stylilization of bodily acts, contradicts the naturalness of a sex-gender connection.[112] Gender, like the hybridised cherry, need not be thought of as composed of two opposed polarities, as fixed and stable; but rather as multiple and in process.

The proposition that gender is a culturally constructed phenomenon and is unrelated to biological sex is played out in the Dog-Woman's behaviour, which serves to suggest that femininity is culturally constructed. In matters of etiquette, she alternates between contradictory positions; she raises her skirts in public places and uses her breasts not for seductive or nurturing purposes, but for fatal ones (Winterson 1990, 12). Yet, she purposely acts in a 'ladylike' manner when eating, especially in front of upper class gentlemen like John Tradescant. When he offers her a peach, she eats very self-consciously, cautiously biting into it in a 'ladylike fashion' and reminding Jordan 'of his manners' (Winterson 1990, 22). She prides herself on her table manners; in comparison to her 'witch' neighbour, who snatches food and 'ram[s] it square into her mouth', the Dog-Woman asserts: 'I'm not one for a knife and spoon myself, but I do know how to eat in company. I know how to use my bread as a plate and dollop the stew on it without spilling the lot down my dress' (Winterson 1990, 14). The Dog-Woman regularly undertakes to dress and present herself as a lady: 'Jordan told me to put on my best clothes for our voyage. I did so, and a plumed hat that sat on my head as a bird nests in

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[112] For an insightful analysis of cross-dressing in various historical and cultural contexts, see Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992).

a tree' (Winterson 1990, 15). On her son's return from Barbados, she knows she must welcome him dressed as a hero's mother: 'I spared no expense and had a new dress made of the finest wool with a beautiful shawl cut out of the altar cloth of Stepney Church' (Winterson 1990, 108). Although she is aware of what is expected of her as a woman, both in appearance and style, her size, stature, and physical strength challenge these stereotypical notions of femininity.

The Dog-Woman describes herself as hideous: 'My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas' (Winterson 1990, 24). She is as big as a mountain, and likens herself to 'a hill of dung' (Winterson 1990, 11).[113] Her physical appearance inverts mythologies of women's 'natural' physiological inferiority, often used to exclude them from competing for powerful roles in society. Women's bodies have been defined and shaped by culture as inferior, weak, and ideally, delicate, and these meanings have been transferred onto ideals of how femininity should be acted out. Although the text comments on the artificial construction of gender, it does not present the body as a mere vessel on which these constructions are imposed. In the Dog-Woman's body, patriarchal assumptions about the female body are conquered; ironically it is her characterization as 'the grotesque personification of culture's symbolic connection of nature and woman' which stages a refusal to acquiesce to culture's attempts to inscribe and control women's bodies (Farwell 1996, 184). *Sexing the Cherry* denaturalizes the link between sex and gender by showing gender to be constructed in the repetition and citation of acts and

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[113] The Dog-Woman's comparison of herself to a mountain recalls Swift's *Gullivers Travels*, in which the Lilliputians call him 'The Man-Mountain'. Susana Onega notes that 'when a frustrated lover complains that she is too big, she retorts, like Gulliver to the King of Brobdingnag, that her bodily parts seemed "all in proportion" to her'. Onega also sees the Dog-Woman's description of her own body as 'in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body characteristic of Renaissance carnival imagery as found, for example, in Shakespeare, Cervantes, Diderot, Voltaire, Swift and Rabelais' (1996, 303). In a similar vein, Onega notes elsewhere that 'the monstrosity of the Dog-Woman's lower half is comparable to that of such mythical half-woman/half-beast monsters as the sirens and harpies, and the Dog-Woman is also associated with 'a specifically Puritan monster, Milton's Sin in *Paradise Lost*'; 'the abject mother condemned to give birth to innumerable Hell Hounds' (1999, 449).

practices. The Dog-Woman's huge and powerful body defies control and shows that

biological sex or anatomy has no natural connections to gendered actions.[114] It also

plays an important part in literally foregrounding a figure previously marginalized in

traditional histories; the Dog-Woman provides a new perspective, which is in

competition with dominant historical discourses. *Sexing the Cherry* not only demystifies

gender and shows it to be cited in culture, but also cites history as a text, and repeats it

with a *difference* to call conventional representations of the past into question.

Choreographing Histories

Set against the backdrop of the English Revolution, *Sexing the Cherry* includes

descriptions of and allusions to what are considered to be some of the most important

moments in traditional accounts of British history, from the rise of the Puritans to the

Civil War, the execution of King Charles I, the rule of Cromwell, and the Restoration.

This is not to suggest, though, that the text clings to a traditionally objective view of

history; on the contrary, it does not reconstruct a 'real' version of events. The text's

questioning of history as an object of knowledge is ironically set during the

Enlightenment, when there was a general view that human beings could rationally

explain their world by using reason, rational thought, and science. During this time,

history became associated with empirical science: the historian's task was to portray the

past as it 'really' was; written histories were to be unbiased factual records written by

detached observers who rationally accounted for historical events. However, *Sexing the*

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[114] Langland has written an insightful article on how the Dog-Woman's physical size and her performance of gendered traits 'disrupts the would-be unity among anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance' (1997, 103). Sara Martin, on the other hand, reads the Dog-Woman's monstrosity as an inversion of power structures and asserts that she cannot constitute a role model for women because she is 'as violent and narrow-minded as any patriarchal man' and may be proof that 'women's dream of power can only lead to creating monsters' (1999, 202-03).

Cherry puts forward a version of history that cannot be an object of knowledge, as our interpretation of it is informed by the present.

Sexing the Cherry's version of history is part accurate, part postmodern fantasy, and in the uncertainty of the boundary between the two, the novel poses the question of what we can know for sure about the past. This is not to say that we can know nothing about history, or that we invent it; rather, we make history from the traces of the past available to us. Traditionally, the past is interpreted by skilled professionals who attempt to bridge the gap between the past and the present. *Sexing the Cherry*, though, invites readers to question what we, as subjects in culture, can know of the past; it suggests that any effort to grasp the absence of the past is merely trying to fulfil a cultural fantasy, because 'to the degree that the present informs our account of the past, we make history *out of a relation, which is always a relation of difference, between the present and the past*' (Belsey 2000, 112). The past cannot be detached from the present; it informs the present as much as the present imposes itself on the past. The past, then, cannot be known as an object of knowledge outside of contemporary culture; although historical documents and evidence can be examined, the questions asked of them are implicitly linked to contemporary cultural values. In turn, certain perspectives and questions do not make an objective, knowable history, but just a certain depiction of history. The past is open to our interpretation, but our interpretation is cultural; if the subject is an effect of culture, as Althusser notes, then the knowledge we possess originates around us. This not only calls the 'truth' of previous traditional historical accounts into question, but also challenges the Enlightenment premise that the subject is the origin and source of beliefs and values.

Sexing the Cherry re-writes history from the perspective of a marginalised character, and from a standpoint at odds with traditional accounts of the English Revolution. It also points to the nature of history as text by blurring boundaries between

reality and fantasy and by employing intertextual references in its depiction of historical

events. The juxtaposition of the Dog-Woman's seemingly factual narration with

Jordan's fantastic journeys calls into question traditional culture's separation of history

from fiction and 'reality' from the imaginary. The novel's blend of apparent historical

'reality' and imaginative fantasy invites the reader to rethink traditional separations of

art and life as well as to consider history not as an object of knowledge, but as

constituted in systems of signification.

History is invented as much as based on historical documents, which is not to

deny that the past existed, but rather point out 'that its accessibility to us now is entirely

conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its

documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*. Even the institutions of

the past, its social structures and practices, could be seen, in one sense, as social texts'

(Hutcheon 1988, 16). Historical narratives, according to Hayden White, are 'verbal

fictions' whose contents are both found and invented, and 'have more in common with

their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences' (1978, 82).

Traditional realist texts present readers with an apparently easily accessible story, which

has a beginning, middle and end, and offers them comfortable and secure positions of

knowledge. The traditional historian, likewise, invites readers to allow the events of a

story to be explained to them: the effect is that they have 'not only successfully *followed*

the story; [...] [they have] grasped the point of it, *understood* it, as well. [...] [They

have] been shown how the data conform to an *icon* of a comprehensible finished

process, a plot structure with which [they are] familiar as a part of [their] cultural

endowment' (White 1978, 86). The historian represses certain aspects of the plot,

sketches characters and informs the story in much the same way as a fiction writer does.

Sexing the Cherry's re-presentation of the English Revolution from the

perspective of a female royalist serves to remind the reader that although the events

actually occurred, we generally name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning (Hutcheon 1988, 97). The novel's depiction of past events does not constitute 'a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting', which makes it a site of struggle for the emergence of new meanings (Hutcheon 1988, 4). The text can be described as 'historiographic metafiction', because it is 'intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages' and its self-awareness of 'history and fiction as human constructs [...] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past' (Hutcheon 1988, 5). *Sexing the Cherry* challenges traditional 'objective' history-writing, suggests that the historian may be as much a literary figure as the author of fiction, and lays bare the repression of certain aspects of history

In comparison to traditional versions of history, which claim impartiality, *Sexing the Cherry* displays history-writing as a range of competing positions which have a relation to power, and asks whose history is represented. History is not only written by highlighting certain events and repressing others, but also by suppressing certain figures and their voices. By allowing the Dog-Woman to narrate the historical events of the seventeenth century, the text highlights that traditional histories are generally told from the perspective of the dominant class, race or sex. Readers are invited to listen to the stories of the politically marginalized and, simultaneously, to question the power that the repression of their voices has given to tellers, and how that power affects women in the present. Historical events of the seventeenth century are relayed in this text by its main female character, who represents generally marginalized figures in the history of the civil war. The Dog-Woman is a member of the lower classes, is unmarried, owns her own house, runs her own business breeding dogs and is head of her household; she not only occupies a position of marginality by retelling history as a woman, but is even an eccentric figure in her own society.

The notion of perspective is highlighted in the text, and is a key aspect in the Dog-Woman's version of events. She provides a marginalized perspective on history, inviting readers to consider that history is told from certain positions, certain perspectives, which are endowed with certain values. Classic realist texts, realist art, and traditional histories are interlinked in the text, and the notion of perspective as a way of organising visual space and creating a knowing subject position is questioned and subverted. Just a century before the civil war, perspective in painting was mastered by Italian, mostly Florentine artists. Perspective, as a way of organising visual space, gave the illusion of depth and coherence and ordered the way things could be seen; it thus contributed to the development of the liberal-humanist subject. The illusion of perspective is achieved by geometrical patterns and lines which conjoin in the 'vanishing point' in paintings. John Berger compares the practice to 'a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light traveling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances *reality*. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world' (1972, 16). It presents to the viewer a 'realistic' picture of the world, which is 'arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God' (Berger 1972, 16). In order to appreciate perspective in art, paintings are best seen from opposite the vanishing point, with one eye closed.

This monocular vision, which positions the spectator as the centre of the world and origin of meanings, is disrupted in *Sexing the Cherry*, as the reader is invited to see history, travel, the imagination, and language from several perspectives. In Jordan's description of Paolo Uccello's painting 'A Hunt in the Forest', the text draws attention to perspective as a marginalizing process: 'When I saw this painting I began only by concentrating on the foreground figures, and only by degrees did I notice the others, some so faint as to be hardly noticeable' (Winterson 1990, 92).[115] The text pulls the

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[115] The text names three paintings: 'A Hunt in the Forest' by Paolo Uccello, 'St. Nicolas Calming the Tempest' by Bicci di Lorenzo, and 'Mr Rose, The Royal Gardener, presents the pineapple to Charles the

marginalized into the foreground; the Dog-Woman, a lower class, unmarried woman with political opinions, is now given centre-stage. Even her size is a comment on perspective; it literally brings her to the forefront and makes people pay attention to her. These challenges to the notion of perspective encourage a concomitant questioning of the perceiving subject as a coherent, autonomous meaning-making individual, as well as inviting readers to pay attention to the background in traditional histories. As a challenge to realist fiction, art, and traditional histories, this postmodern text does not offer readers the illusory security of knowledge, but places them in positions of uncertainty.

This uncertainty is further developed in the characterization of the Dog-Woman. A Rabelaisian figure, she is linked to carnivalesque culture and promotes uncertainty about the stability of meanings. As in the worlds of Rabelais's giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, the Dog-Woman's setting is defined by violence, stupidity, greed, the grotesque, and rebellion against official culture and totalitarian order. Bakhtin uses the term 'carnivalesque' to describe those forms of unofficial culture where hierarchies are inverted for a time; this was precisely the climate of the English civil war, when the king, who occupied the highest position in society, was tried and executed by his own subjects. Carnivalesque discourse challenges official law and linguistic codes; with a logic opposed to Western metaphysics, it transgresses social prohibition, that is, 'God, Law [and] Definition', which is also the dogmatic logic that realist narratives obey (Kristeva 1980c, 70). The Dog-Woman's size and rage characterize her as Rabelaisian, while her challenges to linguistic codes links her to carnivalesque discourse. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law' (Kristeva 1980c, 65). On one occasion, for example, she is

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Second' by Thomas Danckerts (Winterson 1990, 92; 100; 113). All three have either mastered or tried to master perspective.

invited to a royalist meeting where the preacher cries that the king's murder must be avenged, but without breaking the 'Holy Law'. The Dog-Woman comments:

> He said 'Thou shalt not kill' is a tenet of our faith, but we should too be aware of another part of the Law of Moses: 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. I have long been interested in these contradictions and looked forward to a full rendering of their meaning. (Winterson 1990, 84)

She returns to the meetinghouse with '119 eyeballs, one missing on account of a man who had lost one already, and over 2,000 teeth', and wonders why the royalists are not delighted with her good work (Winterson 1990, 85)

The Dog-Woman's inability to understand religious and patriarchal metaphors unmasks them as socially constructed and without stable origins. The text points to the danger involved in arresting the proliferation of meaning and in accepting truths in language as absolute. The Dog-Woman's brutal acts might be read as a comment on the violence that some 'absolute truths' stimulate and perpetuate, encouraging readers to question the transparency of language and the behaviour, including gendered behaviour, it incites. On another occasion, she literalizes metaphors once again. On her way to Wimbledon, she is accosted by a man who stops her and shows her his penis:

> 'Put it in your mouth,' he said. 'Yes, as you would a delicious thing to eat.'
>
> I like to broaden my mind when I can and I did as he suggested, swallowing it up entirely and biting it off with a snap. (Winterson 1990, 41)

This episode exposes and interrogates phallogocentric language and emphasizes the hidden logic of sexual economies. The Dog-Woman's failure to understand religious, social and linguistic conventions invites readers to think about interpretive norms. Like that of Bakhtin's Fool, her incomprehension of and unfamiliarity with social conventions unsettles readers and proposes that no language is universal or transparent:

Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away. (Bauer 1991, 678, quoting Bakhtin)

According to Dale Bauer, a fool is a type of resisting reader *within* the text who unmasks dominant codes, inviting readers to 'question and restructure the "cultural and intertextual frames" in which the character operates and is made foolish' (1991, 678). Fools, or naïve characters 'resist understanding the world according to dominant conventions, resist abstract categories of language, and also refuse to (or cannot) accept whole-heartedly the ideology of the other; their naiveté remains and because of this ignorance, not despite it, a struggle emerges' (Bauer 1991, 678).[116] The Dog-Woman, then, 'transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality' and highlights patriarchal metaphors and language as constructed and open to change (Kristeva 1980c, 70).

Even while it operates within a part-fantastical and part-historical pastiche of seventeenth-century London, the novel stages a revolutionary practice, defined by Kristeva as 'the *political activity* whose aim is the radical transformation of social structures' (1984, 104). Enlightenment thinkers placed their faith in knowledge and science as human liberators, believing that progress could be achieved through scientific discovery and innate human rationality (Harvey 1990, 13). Rejecting religion and superstition in favour of positivism and determinism, they believed that human emancipation was attainable. In certain respects the Dog-Woman's depiction appears to support reason, especially her 'common-sense' approach to life and language; however, she is a stern believer in the word of God and fights religious hypocrisy, challenging the anti-religious tenets of Enlightenment philosophy. She is unhappy when Jordan sets off on his voyages of discovery and is horrified by the notion of grafting and interfering

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[116] Jana L. French also notes that the Dog-Woman is a figuration of the Bakhtinian fool, and asserts that she embodies the carnival spirit Bakhtin associates with the Menippean tradition (1999).

with what nature 'intended', a stance at odds with Enlightenment investment in

discovery and scientific progress. She appears to counter the ideology of progress taking

hold at the time; this might be perceived as conservative and anti-revolutionary, but it

also points to the subject's ability to reject dominant discourses in favour of resistant

ones. This postmodern text calls into doubt the emancipation the English Revolution is

seen to have enacted and the modernity it installed.[117]

The novel also rejects chronological modes of storytelling. Traditional notions

of the English Revolution and its retelling in linear, progressive narratives are bound up

in Enlightenment ideals of progress, reason, and rationality. Kristeva notes that

> Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts
>
> read by the writer, into which he inserts himself by rewriting them. Diachrony is
>
> transformed into synchrony, and in light of this transformation, *linear* history
>
> appears as abstraction. The only way a writer can participate in history is by
>
> transgressing this abstraction through a process of reading-writing. (1980c, 65)

This novel challenges history as a linear progression, not only by implicitly calling into

doubt Enlightenment notions of progress, but also by highlighting its textual status.

History here is a text, which is re-read and placed in a new context, just as the novel's

intertexts are redistributed, opened up to new meanings and reinvigorated.

The text also invites readers to challenge Western conceptions of history as

linear by challenging traditional views of the nature of time. Jordan's meeting with the

Hopi Indian Tribe shows that cultures construct particular types of subjects, and that

language affects how we see the world and time: 'their language has no grammar in the

way we recognize it. Most bizarre of all, they have no tenses for past, present and

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[117] None of Winterson's critics have asked how this postmodern approach tallies with feminism, which many feminists argue has grounds in the Enlightenment. Some feminists, as outlined in my introduction, argue for a continuation of the Enlightenment's autonomous subject, asking why they should let go of the ideal of autonomous identity when only men were granted it in the past. Rather than uncritically appropriating Enlightenment ideals, which would involve granting women illusory autonomy as meaning-makers just because men supposedly had it at one time, *Sexing the Cherry* examines and problematizes autonomous subjectivity and offers alternatives to it in the form of multiple subjectivities.

future. They do not sense time in that way. For them, time is one' (Winterson 1990,

134-35). The Hopi tribe has no concept of time as an objective entity because their

language has no words or grammatical forms that refer directly to time; it cannot be

perceived in linear terms in a language which lacks a time-space metaphor. This not

only points to the constructed nature of subjectivity, but also offers the idea that it is not

'natural' to think about time as linear and opens up the possibility of imagining it in

different terms. Although this may be impossible, as the English language is full of so

many references to time, the text itself nevertheless places readers in positions where

they often have no idea of time or place, most notably in Jordan's travels of the mind.

The Dog-Woman provides the only point of reference to time and place in the text,

mentioning dates, places, and historical figures, and relating this to Jordan's age and

activities at those times; she situates the story within a chronological, linear calendar.

Jordan, on the other hand, charts imaginative territories, meeting fairytale princesses

and mythological characters, and visiting cities with no floors. Jordan sets out to record

his journeys, but 'not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did

make in some other place or time' (Winterson 1990, 10).[118]

Sexing the Cherry opens itself up to space and infinity and rejects a linear

concept of time in its introduction of two twentieth-century characters - the modern

incarnations or alter-egos of the seventeenth-century protagonists. Their insertion

invites readers to question traditional Western understandings of time as chronological

and linear, just as the text as a whole disputes the notion of linear storytelling. The

notion of parallel lives is established and the invasion of past into present and vice versa

is acknowledged. Nicholas Jordan and an unnamed environmentalist woman share the

attitudes and language of their seventeenth-century counterparts; Jordan and Nicholas

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[118] Onega (1999, 444) and Clingham (1998, 71) note that Jordan's notion of time and his internal journeys of the mind echo T.S. Eliot's fourth category of time in "Burnt Norton" in the Four Quartets.

share an interest in heroic ideals, and the Dog-Woman and environmentalist woman are

both concerned with fighting corruption.

A factory which is polluting the river Thames with mercury, symbolising

patriarchal capitalism, is burned down by the environmentalist woman. The Dog-

Woman, likewise, starts the Great Fire of London, symbolically ending 'the patriarchal

order associated with the Puritan Commonwealth' (Onega 1996, 309). The merging of

these two events 'disrupts the linear chronology of history in favour of the cyclical

temporality of myth' (Onega 1996, 309). It not only disrupts linear chronology, but also

shows that the faults inherent in the Enlightenment project of emancipation have come

to light. The Thames has been polluted due to scientific development, world poverty is

overshadowed by defense budgets, and 'men in suits' sit in boardrooms discussing these

issues (Winterson 1990, 122). The optimistic quest for human emancipation and the

goal to scientifically dominate nature have led to oppression and cruelty; history,

reason, and logic have failed as organising principles. The juxtaposition of the

seventeenth- and twentieth-century characters invites the reader to note the difference

between the two cultures and the possibility that things need not be as they are. The

text's setting in two different centuries, two different cultures, opens up the idea that

culture is not natural or given, but is made in meanings. Different cultural contexts

highlight the constructed nature of other cultures.

As in *The Dancers Dancing, Sexing the Cherry* offers an account of the past that

has implications for the present. The figures of Nicholas Jordan and the

environmentalist women suggest that an acknowledgement and reconsideration of the

past allows for the future to be rethought. *Sexing the Cherry* transgresses the idea of

linear history not only by reading and rewriting history, but by interweaving the

seventeenth- and twentieth-century moments, rather than presenting them

consecutively.[119] The entwining of past and present and the text's challenge to

traditional histories, realist fiction and monocular perspective allow traditionally

dominant perspectives to be challenged.

The environmentalist woman suggests that inhabiting numerous bodies in the

past and in the future may lead to different perspectives on the past, present and future,

and allow multiple subjectivities to be embraced:

> Outwardly nothing is changing for me, but inwardly I am not always here,
>
> sitting by a rotting river. I can still escape. Escape from what? The present? Yes,
>
> from this foreground that blinds me to whatever may be happening in the
>
> distance. If I have a spirit, a soul, any name will do, then it won't be single, it
>
> will be multiple. Its dimension will not be one of confinement but one of space.
>
> It may inhabit numerous changing decaying bodies in the future and in the past.
>
> (Winterson 1990, 126)

The novel's portrayal of the historical setting of the founding of modern, sovereign

subjectivity throws into relief the culturally constructed status of the autonomous

subject. It denaturalises it, showing it to be just one way of approaching human

experience, and invites the reader to consider that 'the regime of the subject and the

colonial technologies that produced it can be seen to be historically specific ways of

addressing the felt sense—in history and in representation—of the incoherence and

fragmentation of human life' (Moore 1995, 106). The environmentalist woman's

subjectivity is in process; it dances between the past, present and future and cannot be

pinned down.

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[119] Roessner argues that the novel stages a 'complete rejection of patriarchal history and its linear temporality' and 'endorses an apocalyptic urge to escape history' (2002, 102, 104). Far from displaying an urge to escape history, I would argue that the text pleads for an acknowledgement of history in its various alternatives and indeed, its various intertextual references and parodies rely on traditional texts and histories as much as they reject them.

Similarly, the reader is not offered any single accessible way of reading the text and instead is offered countless points of view. The novel asks readers to use the past to comment on the present; not the past as it is conventionally accepted, but a re-imagined past, which prompts a re-imagining of the present and future. Instead of presenting a solution to women's everyday political problems in the form of a principle to adhere to, the text offers multiple subjectivities and view-points for the reader to accept or reject. Rather than march along with the rules of a certain kind of feminist politics, the text dances in a way which is much more beneficial to a true politics, which is ever-changing and will not become stagnant; a view appropriately summarised in the words of the Dog-Woman: 'With everyone in accord, what merriment is there?' (Winterson 1990, 63).

Chapter Three: Lady Oracle

At critical moments in her life, Joan Foster dances. As a postmodern text, *Lady Oracle*

offers readers the opportunity to reflect on multiple subjectivities, the dancing body, and

the future of feminism as a political project. These are offered for consideration in the

text's reinscription of poetry, Hollywood films, fairy tales and gothic romance novels.

This chapter will focus on how the text is positioned in relation to these intertexts, the

differences between them, and the meanings they invoke. Reading Joan Foster as a

network of citations, I shall examine the influence of textuality on her subjectivity, as

well as its potential effect on the reader. Obviously and self-consciously parodying the

ideology gothic romance promotes, the text invites readers to critique the knowledges

Joan is influenced by, and to see in them the possibility of reinscribing women in less

restrictive ways. Joan's final dance is explored here as a choreography that deconstructs

the opposition between mind and body; like the text's, the boundaries of each are

unstable and unknown.

Weaving Inter/texts

In her enraged dance as a mothball, Joan repudiates the feminine submission imposed

by her ballet classes; alone on her balcony in Terremoto, she dances for her own

pleasure, affirming her independence. These episodes, which I shall discuss in more

detail later, find their place in a postmodern novel that invites the reader into its own

intertextual dance. It is difficult to gain a single perspective on this postmodern text or

to clarify and summarise its plot. Split into five parts, like acts in a drama, it seduces

readers into the belief that they are to encounter a structured, accessible text, but that

security is soon taken away. The five parts correspond roughly to different parts of Joan

Foster's life. Frank Davey summarises them: 'Part I concerns Joan's exile in Italy; Part II her childhood in Toronto; Part III her young adulthood in England; Part IV her marriage to Arthur and escape through pretended suicide; Part V her resolution of her exile' (1983, 215). Davey's neat outline, however, is very tenuous; a division of the text into structured parts is ineffectual as each one invades the others. Joan's story is not chronological; there is no simple progression or traditional autobiographical description of childhood through to adulthood, as might be found in a *Bildungsroman*. The text demonstrates that the temporality of memory is not linear; Joan's predicament in Terremoto is interwoven with stories from different times in her past, which are, in turn, interrupted by excerpts from her costume gothic novels, *Escape from Love* and *Stalked by Love*. These novels-within-a-novel incorporate aspects of Joan's life and vice versa. *Lady Oracle* is a multi-layered text; it is written by Margaret Atwood, is the story of Joan as told by herself, and incorporates Joan's text, *Stalked by Love*, which both echoes and influences her 'life'. Both Joan's story and *Stalked by Love* are in process throughout the text, just as the subject is in process. In its blending of texts, *Lady Oracle* invites the reader to occupy a position of uncertainty as to what is 'real' and what is fiction, as well as making it difficult for the novel to be read as one stable, unified, chronological narrative.[120]

The novel owes something to detective narratives; beginning with a 'murder', it then reconstructs the events that lead up to it. However, contrary to the detective novel's climax in the dissolution of enigma, here the 'murder victim' is still alive, has, in fact, staged her own murder. We are told the events which lead up to the 'murder', ironically, by the person who has 'died'. Interwoven with this explanation, though, are many more details of her life; the novel does not end at the moment when her 'murder' is solved for readers, but continues beyond the point where her faked death is explained. The novel's

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[120] Sherrill Grace discusses how *Lady Oracle* parodies traditional autobiographical styles by denying the reader any picture of a teleological self (1994). Similarly, Eleonora Rao reads the novel as a refutation of unity, in terms of genre and subjectivity (1994).

operation includes, yet steps beyond, what Kristeva calls 'the bounded text', in which

we '*already* know how the story will end: the end of the narrative is given before the

narrative itself even begins. All anecdotal interest is thus eliminated: the novel will play

itself out by rebuilding the distance between life and death; it will be nothing other than

an inscription of *deviations* (surprises) that do not destroy the certainty of the thematic

loop (life-death) holding the set together' (Kristeva 1980a, 42). Rather than following

the obvious pathway of conventional detective narratives, then, the novel creates new

patterns, both by parodying predictable forms and by incorporating various intertexts.

The very beginning of the novel warns that Joan's wish to plan her death, or control her

life, leaving 'no loose ends' is an impossible task.

The novel dances thematically, formally, and in its relation with its intertexts,

and invites the reader to partake in this dance; like the dancer, it operates 'according to a

serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations. The logic regulating the

text is not comprehensive [...] but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities,

carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy (Barthes 1977a, 158). The

'symbolic energy' is liberated by the text's refusal of chronology and 'comprehensive'

logic as well as its interweaving of overlapping inter- and intra-texts. *Lady Oracle* does

not rely on the classical reading subject or reduce communication to 'the classical

schema postulated by linguistics: sender, channel, receiver', but rather, is a *signifying*

practice, which 'restores to language its active energy' (Barthes 1981, 36). The energy

of the dance is enacted in this jubilant text, which invites dancing subjects to participate

in meaning-making; the act its signifying practice implies 'is not an act of

understanding [...], and therein lies the epistemological mutation: the subject no longer

has the fine unity of the Cartesian "cogito"; it is a plural subject' (Barthes 1981, 36).

Lady Oracle is not a 'ready-made veil', which can be pinned down to one meaning by a

coherent subject; rather it is a 'perpetual interweaving', composed of layers of threads

or intertexts, woven and unpicked by the fictional Joan as well as by the reader (Barthes 1975, 64).

The relationship between texts and discourses is often compared to the weaving together of threads and tissues. The latin *textus*, meaning style or texture of a work, originally meant 'a thing woven', coming from *textere*, to weave. 'Intertextuality' is derived from the latin *intertexto*, meaning to intermingle while weaving. Roland Barthes points out that the weaving and braiding of 'codes' constitutes the text:

> The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitute a braid (*text, fabric, braid*: the same thing); each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided—or braiding— voices form the writing: when it is alone, the voice does no labor, transforms nothing: it *expresses*; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation. (Barthes 1990, 160)

The codes or voices are braided into a fabric, or text, but without the reader, who intervenes 'to gather and intertwine' these threads, the text merely 'expresses'. With an active reader, though, engaged in producing active meanings, 'transformation' begins; the threads, or intertexts, are juxtaposed and interwoven in order to transform them into something new.

Lady Oracle is pervaded by references to sewing, weaving, and the creation of texts. From a young age the overweight Joan refuses to sew in any traditional sense. She did not study Home Economics in school and 'shrank from the thought of sewing': 'How could I possibly sit there, sewing a huge billowing tent for myself, while the others worked away at their trim tailored skirts and ruffled blouses?' (Atwood 1982, 209). Her size, itself a refusal of conventional femininity, spurs on her rejection of this type of domestic training, designed to prepare girls for stereotypical gender roles. Later on, the text calls attention to the effect of such gender-specific activities, designed to

perpetuate understandings of the sexes in a binary opposition: while Paul relays his

adventures during war-times, he tells Joan "'women do not understand these things [...].

They believe that life is babies and sewing." "I can't sew," I said, but he would merely

say, "Later you will sew. You are so young'" (Atwood 1982, 159). Joan does sew, but

not in any traditional or domestic sense: she stitches and weaves texts, or 'dense

fabric[s]' (Macherey 1978, 55). The notion of sewing, embroidery, or weaving as

traditionally female activities takes on a new meaning in *Lady Oracle*: the protagonist

weaves together fairy tales, gothic and romance fiction, films and poetry to produce

something that is not easily unravelled and yet is left with loose threads.

Joan's costume gothics and her poem, 'Lady Oracle', interweave echoes of

many other texts, and, in doing so, contest the notion of the Author as the sole 'creator'

of an original text. 'Lady Oracle' echoes 'The Lady of Shalott'; the first reference to

Tennyson's poem occurs when Joan finds that her real experience of London is entirely

different to what she had expected.[121] Like the Lady of Shalott, who sat weaving a

pattern of a 'reality' reflected in a mirror, Joan had woven an idea of what London

should look like according to how she had seen it reflected in literature and art. She is

sorely disappointed: 'Instead of the castles and ladies, though, there was only a lot of

traffic and a large number of squat people with bad teeth' (Atwood 1982, 143).

Juxtaposed with this disappointment is Joan's memory of looking up 'shalott' in the

dictionary years before, only to discover that a shallot is a *'kind of small onion'*,

'fatally' destroying her previous romantic investment the poem:

I am half-sick of shadows, said

The Lady of Small Onion. (Atwood 1982, 143)

This bathetic reinscription not only points to the connotations words have in different

contexts and their instability, but also makes the modern reader of *Lady Oracle* aware of

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[121] Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' is itself an intertextual weaving of fairy tales such as *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty*, of *Morte d'Arthur*, and Victorian concerns about women's space.

an ironic distance between *Lady Oracle* and the 'Lady of Shalott'. In Tennyson's poem

there is nostalgia for full representation: one look out the window at real life can

literally shatter the illusion of what the framed mirror or the embroidered tapestry

appears to present. For the lady, seeing 'reality' is a 'curse', it is her 'doom', but

ultimately for Joan and for the reader, the realisation that realist literature or art cannot

ever present the real is liberating: it allows for movement beyond the restrictive rules of

realism. Mirrors are not used in *Lady Oracle* to try to reflect reality, but to reflect

different texts off each other, with a difference. Initially there are similarities between

Joan and Tennyson's lady: both are artists: one weaves a tapestry, the other, texts, and

both are disappointed by the lack of correspondence between reality and the

imagination. However, the lady's death by drowning, brought on by seeing 'reality', is

reconfigured in *Lady Oracle*; Joan's feigned death in Lake Ontario echoes the

drowning, but she rises from the lake to be reborn. Felicia in *Stalked By Love* is an

amalgamation of Joan and the Lady of Shalott; in her figure, Joan rewrites the ending of

Tennyson's poem, not in a simple reversal of fortune for the heroine, ending in marriage

or happy unison with Lancelot, but rather in rebirth: the lady rises from the depths of the

lake to be offered choices.

By citing Romantic poetry, which is based on a belief in the individual

originating mind, *Lady Oracle* explicitly invites the reader to note that texts can be read

in different ways. Meaning is not held in place by the individual Author as its creator or

source; rather it can change in different contexts, and according to different readers.

When the sales of 'Lady Oracle' boom because the public think she is dead, Joan

becomes the object of a 'death cult', like the Lady of Shalott: 'I'd been shoved into the

ranks of those other unhappy ladies, scores of them apparently, who'd been killed by a

surfeit of words' (Atwood 1982, 313). After her 'death', she is suspected of suicide, and

the media detail her apparent 'morbid intensity, [her] doomed eyes, the fits of

depression to which [she] was apparently subject' (Atwood 1982, 313). Newspaper articles on the suicide of the author of 'Lady Oracle' express regret and remember her 'ethereal beauty':

> Several of the articles drew morals: you could sing and dance or you could be happy, but not both. Maybe they were right, you could stay in the tower for years, weaving away, looking in the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The curse, the doom. (Atwood 1982, 313)

This ironic look at the literary community's representation of certain women writers invites the reader to acknowledge that the texts of such authors as Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Virginia Woolf might be read differently if they were read separately from their 'tragic' lives. The fact that her poetry increases in popularity because the public believe she is dead also invites the reader to take an ironic look at the value laid upon the originating artist or the mind 'behind' the work. The poem humorously highlights the point that the poet is not the source of meaning: Joan cannot even comprehend the work herself, readers and reviewers view it as a feminist's comment on male-female relations in the 1970s, while Arthur reads the poem as an assault on him and on their marriage.

Lady Oracle questions the realist premise that fiction should mirror reality by inviting the reader to notice that reality may also mirror fiction. It also calls into question where the borders of art and reality lie and whether they can be separated. The reader is invited to rethink literature, not as a reflection of reality, but as a discourse, which contributes to forming subjectivity in 'real' life. We cannot separate ourselves from texts, since they play an important part in how we make sense of and construct our subjectivities. Awareness of the part that fiction plays in constructing subjectivity is key in this text, which denaturalises many of the myths we live our lives by.

Stalked by Love challenges Aristotle's premise that art should mirror life, as not

only does the fiction mirror Joan's life, but her life often mirrors her own texts. The

costume gothic genre is mirrored in *Stalked by Love*, but the reader sees it reflected

differently when placed within a different cultural context and when juxtaposed with the

remainder of *Lady Oracle*. *Stalked by Love* mirrors other texts with a difference, like the

distorted, yellowing, warped one in Charlotte's room with the word 'BEWARE' written

upon it (Atwood 1982, 193). As well as warning Charlotte, this mirror may caution the

reader not to expect *Stalked By Love* to be a direct reflection of gothic or romantic

literature and to beware that literature does not mirror 'reality' but can be a warped

representation of it. In this way, the novel engages in a self-conscious mirroring process

by incorporating criticism within its own structure. The texts mentioned in the novel,

such as 'The Lady of Shalott' or the film *The Red Shoes*, are themselves mirrors of

other texts; they overlap in a 'remarkable specular play' (Givner 1989, 141).[122] Pamela

Bromberg asserts that in *Lady Oracle* 'mirrors symbolize [...] the crippling emphasis

that society places on the female image as a consumer item', and reads Joan and her

novels as a symptom of the internalisation of male gaze in Romantic plots (1988, 13).[123]

I would argue that while the novel addresses ideal images of femininity, it also suggests

that mirrors can function in a positive way, that is, intertextually. The text offers readers

the opportunity to see themselves reflected or represented in the text and to choose new

and better presentations of women.

Predictability Parodied

Stalked by Love is the locus of a mixture of gothic and romance novels such as

Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, Villette, Frankenstein, The Mysteries of Udolpho and

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[122] Jessie Givner argues that mirrors in the text refute closure and framing (1989).

[123] Ann McMillan (1988) gives an insightful reading of the Gothic elements in *Lady Oracle*. Atwood's gothic female's eye does not transform men from threats into saviours, but turns upon herself to increase her self-awareness.

Northanger Abbey, and their popular descendants in the formula romance. This is not to

imply that *Stalked by Love* refers to 'originals', as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

Gothic novels were themselves a mixture of previous forms:

> While certain devices and plots, what might be called the staples of the Gothic,
>
> are clearly identifiable in early Gothic texts, the tradition draws on medieval
>
> romances, supernatural, Faustian and fairy tales, Renaissance drama,
>
> sentimental, picaresque and confessional narratives as well as the ruins, tombs
>
> and nocturnal speculations that fascinated Graveyard poets. (Botting 1996, 14)

The gothic text is literally 'haunted' by other texts: 'The book is furrowed by the

allusive presence of those other books against which it is elaborated; it circles about the

absence of that which it cannot say, haunted by the absence of certain repressed words

which make their return' (Macherey 1978, 80). Even the genres parodied in *Lady*

Oracle cannot be fully identified or stabilised, because they are themselves multi-

dimensional spaces where intertexts merge and collide. Nonetheless, the novel offers

the stock plots and characterisations of gothic romance novels for consideration,

parodying them in both revolutionary and reverential ways.

Many critics have noted the gothic elements in *Lady Oracle*, in terms of both

Joan's texts and the effect they have on her own behaviour.[124] However, few have

investigated the text as parodic or focused on the positions it offers readers.[125] The

reappropriation of gothic-romance novels is significant, as they have often been

criticised for their 'negative' effects on readers; in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, they were thought to endanger literary and social values and were deemed to

be an idle waste of time (Botting 1996, 9). George Eliot, in 'Silly Novels by Lady

Novelists', condemns such texts' perpetuation of gender stereotypes, attacks their

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[124] Sybil Korff Vincent asserts that the text creates a comic-gothic subgenre, the comedic elements of which grant Joan power over the fears of being female written in Gothic novels (1983).
[125] Susanne Becker reads the novel as a resistant and reverential parody of gothic novels, but her work leaves room for a more sustained account of the potential influence this has on readers (1999).

presentations of 'reality' and describes them as frothy, prosy, pious and pedantic (1990, 140). Mary Wollstonecraft also argues that such novels present and perpetuate the notion of women as sentimental and helpless; she refers to their authors as 'stupid novelists, who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste' (1996, 190). Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* has evidently internalised such concerns when she assumes that Henry Tilney can never have read Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*: 'They are not clever enough for you— gentlemen read better books'. She is relieved, though, to find her tastes approved by the novel's hero: 'I am very glad to hear it indeed, and now I shall never be ashamed of liking Udolpho myself. But I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly' (Austen 1995, 95-96). As is clear from Austen's parody, such stories were, like Joan's, categorised as 'trash'.

Joan admits that she has always kept her novels a secret from Arthur for fear of losing his respect:

> Why did I never tell him? It was fear mostly. When I met him he talked a lot
>
> about wanting a woman whose mind he could respect, and I knew that if he
>
> found out I'd written *The Secret of Morgrave Manor* he wouldn't respect mine.
>
> [...] These books [...] would be considered trash of the lowest order. Worse than
>
> trash, for didn't they exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate
>
> degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted? (Atwood 1982, 33-
>
> 34)

Despite her awareness of the negative aspects of her novels, Joan continues to create weak and helpless heroines who rely upon men to rescue them, until, that is, she discovers that the gothic romance plot can be exceeded and its predictable paths transformed into labyrinths. In turn, *Lady Oracle* as a whole invites readers to see the

restrictiveness of 'such flimsy works' and induces them 'to read something superiour'

(Wollstonecraft 1996, 192).

In *Lady Oracle* a good deal of attention is given to the effect Joan's costume

gothics have on her readers. Indeed, Joan herself is simultaneously a reader and writer

of texts; the texts she writes are based on the romance novels she read as a teenager,

highlighting the idea of writing 'as a reading of the anterior literary corpus' (Kristeva

1980c, 69). Joan rewrites these texts, which have provided her with escape, to provide

other readers with a similar flight from their disappointing lives: 'when they were too

tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner

drugstore. [...] I had the power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold' (Atwood

1982, 34-35). The fairytale allusion defines the project as wish-fulfilment. Joan

considers her readers to be 'those who got married too young, who had babies too early,

who wanted princes and castles and ended up with cramped apartments and grudging

husbands' (Atwood 1982, 95). This self-consciously alerts the reader to the effect that

Lady Oracle, and literature in general can have on subjectivity. Joan positions herself as

a fairy godmother, providing her readers with an escape route to worlds where they can

identity with princesses. Like her readers, Joan indulges in escapist fantasies, not only

imagining that her life might one day be similar to the plot of her novels, but also

adopting an imaginary personality and a pseudonym to match.

In order to keep her identity as the writer of romances a secret, Joan assumes the

name 'Louisa K. Delacourt', after her Aunt Lou. Louisa K. Delacourt, the costume

gothic writer, becomes a facet of Joan's personality, which she tries to completely

separate from the rest of her life; an ultimately futile attempt. Her endeavours to create a

comfortable position for herself and for her readers simply perpetuate the illusory

positions of knowledge that costume gothic offer to readers. In the course of the text,

Joan changes from 'an escape artist', who maintains and invests in images of women as

weak and as reliant on men, into an independent subject who becomes aware of the value of resistant discourses. The subject constituted by one set of meanings is open to change when it encounters new ones; in this case, the meanings attached to her novels which make them 'trashy' and the negative meanings attached to femininity are reconfigured. In the process, the novel ironically invites the reader to ask whether the gothic-romance genre should be entirely discarded as 'trash of the lowest order'; if it has such a powerful effect on women, can it not be reconfigured to positive ends?

Stalked by Love appears at intervals throughout the text and unfolds before the reader's eyes as Joan composes it in Italy. Its stock characters and clichés are typical of gothic romance, until the penultimate instalment. It is not a direct imitation of classic gothic or romantic texts, but is an exaggerated version of them, and consistently highlights the predictability of the plot and hackneyed characterisations. *Stalked by Love* operates by citing other texts, employing a common repertoire of intertextual sources, including popular romances, as well as *Jane Eyre* and *Northanger Abbey*. *Lady Oracle*'s parody of romance texts is so successful because of readers' familiarity with the genre; in fact, their familiarity is what makes romances 'so *easy* to read. [...] We *know* all this already. The source of our knowledge is intertextual. Popular romance is clearly rooted in the nineteenth-century novel, with its recurring commitment to the project of disentangling true love from false. The structure of many of the formula romances is already to be found in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*' (Belsey 1994, 31). Gothic texts similarly superficially embody stable, unified narratives, presenting readers with what they 'know' already, both in content and form. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts that the gothic genre sets up expectations in the reader from the very start:

> Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind [...] you can predict its contents with an unnerving certainty. You know the important features of its *mise en scène*: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society.

You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of

her lover. You know about [...] sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean

spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties. (1986, 9)

The repetition of 'you know' in Sedgwick's comment emphasises that although gothic

texts engage in otherworldly mysteries, they nevertheless present readers with well-

known and familiar tropes, plots and characters. Like the classic realist text, which

progresses from enigma to closure, the gothic-romance novel invites readers to occupy

positions of knowing subjectivity from which they can master the text. This mastery,

however, is an illusion, as the text actually attempts to limit readers, offering them a

position from which the text is most easily 'decoded'; realist texts encourage only one

perspective in their task of 'protecting consciousness from doubt' (Lyotard 1992, 15).

Stalked by Love reproduces the 'syntax and lexicon' with which the reader is

already familiar; but in this instance the comfortable, 'therapeutic' position this invites

the reader to assume is soon thrown into disarray in favour of a consideration of

multiple view points (Lyotard 1992, 15). Joan Foster reuses the stock 'signs, figures,

relationships and structures' of gothic novels, but unlike the romances she parodies, she

calls attention to the predictability of her text (Foucault 1991, 114).[126] When she finds

that Fraser Buchanan has stolen the first eight pages of *Stalked by Love*, Joan admits

that 'it wouldn't be too difficult to reconstruct the opening pages' and immediately

recalls the beginning of the clichéd plot:

The master of the house [...] would express surprise that the jewel restorers had

sent a woman, and would imply that she wasn't up to the job. She would answer

him firmly, even a little defiantly. He would notice the challenge in her lustrous

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[126] Foucault explains that 'in the nineteenth-century Gothic novel one will find [...] the theme of the
heroine caught in the trap of her own innocence, the hidden castle, the character of the black, cursed hero
devoted to making the world expiate the evil done to him, and all the rest of it' (1991, 114).

blue eyes, and remark that she was perhaps a little too independent for her own good. (Atwood 1982, 32)

This echoes so many other gothic and romance texts that it is easily recognised and overly familiar to both Joan and the reader. Defining the plot and aspects of characters in such a way reaffirms for the reader the predictability and familiarity of such texts. The plots of gothic-romance novels are as familiar to the reader as those of fairy tales: many popular romances retell the story of a heroine obliged to work far from home, who is vulnerable to the whims of a mysterious, male employer, but who, owing to her physical beauty and moral uprightness, eventually secures happiness and a place in society by marrying that very man. *Stalked by Love* invites the reader to recognise aspects of well-known gothic-romance novels, especially, as the protagonist's name suggests, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte, like Jane, is an orphan; her mother danced in an opera house, like the mother of Brontë's orphaned Adele. Redmond shares an abrupt, Byronic manner with Rochester and Charlotte finds her clothes ripped to shreds, just as Jane finds her wedding dress has been mysteriously torn. Mrs Ryerson, the housekeeper in *Stalked by Love*, is reminiscent of Mrs Fairfax in *Jane Eyre*. *Lady Oracle* also continues the theme of hidden, insane or dead wives; however, unlike Rochester's Bertha, Felicia reappears at the end of the text and does not meet a tragic end. *Stalked by Love* does not confine its parody to one text in particular, but invokes a whole genre.

The juxtaposition of *Stalked by Love* with *Lady Oracle* invites readers to become more aware of the dangerously therapeutic quality of familiar genres. Contrary to staging an imitation of the gothic romance novel, which would involve taking 'what is imitated (repeated) seriously, claiming and appropriating it without relativizing it', *Lady Oracle* establishes a distance from it by means of self-conscious parody (Kristeva 1980c, 73). Far from merely imitating the gothic romance genre and perpetuating its

ideologies of femininity, *Lady Oracle* enacts for the reader Wollstonecraft's suggestion

for correcting a 'fondness' for such novels:

> The best method, I believe, [...] is to ridicule them: not indiscriminately, for
>
> then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for
>
> humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out both by tones, and apt
>
> comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how
>
> foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be
>
> substituted instead of romantic sentiments. (1996, 192)

Joan is, ironically, the resisting reader who 'points out by tones and apt comparisons'

the caricatures presented in gothic romances. By self-consciously highlighting the

clichéd nature of romance novels, by juxtaposing *Stalked by Love* with *Lady Oracle* and

highlighting Joan's decreasing investment in the ideology her novels promote, the text

offers readers a 'difference of view' on a female literary tradition.

> Thinking back through the mother becomes a gesture at once of recuperation and
>
> of revision. The rediscovery of a female literary tradition need not mean a return
>
> to specifically 'female' (that is, potentially confining) domains [...]. Rather, they
>
> involve a recognition that all attempts to inscribe female differences within
>
> writing are a matter of inscribing women within fictions of one kind or another.
>
> [...] What is at stake for both women writing and writing about women is the
>
> rewriting of these fictions—the work of revision which makes 'the difference of
>
> view' a question rather than an answer, and a question to be asked not simply of
>
> women, but of writing too. (Jacobus 1986, 39-40)

Parody, Pastiche and Femininity

Lady Oracle engages with past texts and ideologies, inviting the reader to notice both

similarities and differences between them and contemporary ones. It contests Fredric

Jameson's claim that postmodern, parodic texts are pointless and display 'the random

cannibalisation of all the styles of the past', and 'the play of random stylistic allusion'

(1991, 18). Jameson argues that in the culture of late capitalism, parody is overtaken by

pastiche:

> A neutral practice of [parody's] mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior
>
> motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any
>
> conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed,
>
> some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a
>
> statue with blind eyeballs. (1991, 17)

This 'healthy linguistic normality', according to Jameson, has disappeared in culture (in

which 'the norm itself is eclipsed') because 'the advanced capitalist countries today are

now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm' (1991, 17). No

resistance can take place if we are without a norm; without it, there is simply nothing to

resist. The only option left is to turn 'to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech

through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global

culture' (Jameson 1991, 17-18). Jameson bemoans what he calls the 'heterogeneity' of

culture, which according to him, makes parody useless because it has no hierarchy of

discourses to react against. His belief that pastiche is engendered by the decreasing

availability of personal style displays an investment in the notion of originality and a

concomitant nostalgia for stable, liberal-humanist subjectivity. If there are no norms left

to resist, then why does Joan feel she must hide her manuscripts from Arthur? Why also

does she finally rewrite the script of both her text and women's subjectivity?

Lady Oracle offers a counter-example to Jameson's assertion that parody finds

itself without a vocation in contemporary literature. Far from collapsing into a

meaningless return to past styles, it provides a politically critical argument by engaging

in parody, not pastiche. Referring to past texts and genres and the types of subjects they

interpellate, the novel demonstrates that, even though they may change with time,

norms always exist and therefore can always be resisted. A parody of a genre or text

relies on 'that which it cannot say' because parody depends on irony: a mode that

operates by nature of what is not said. Parody relies on 'the allusive presence' of other

texts, that is, intertextuality.

In *A Theory of Parody,* Linda Hutcheon attempts to separate parody from

intertextuality by citing Michael Riffaterre's theory of intertextuality, in which:

> The experience of literature involves a text, a reader, and his or her reactions,
>
> which take the form of systems of words that are grouped associatively in the
>
> reader's mind. But in the case of parody those groupings are carefully
>
> controlled. [...] As readers or viewers or listeners who decode parodic
>
> structures, we also act as decoders of encoded intent. (Hutcheon 2000, 23)[127]

Here a clear line is drawn between the reader's more liberated reaction to the text in

intertextuality and the control of that reaction in parody by 'encoded intent'. Hutcheon

differentiates parody from intertextuality by stating that it is 'not a matter (as in

intertextuality) of a general ability to call on what one has read, but, rather, it is specific

to the particular text or conventions being parodied' (2000, 96). Hutcheon's need to

stabilise and define the exact workings of parody, to restrict it to a 'specific' text or

convention ultimately leads to reliance on Authorial intention. Parody may designate

particular texts, genres or tropes, which are to be viewed ironically, but ultimately,

Authors have no control over the reader's reactions; their 'intent' is irrelevant.

Intertextuality and parody cannot be entirely separated; intertextuality does not

necessarily rely on irony or particular attitudes, but still operates *within* parody.

Riffaterre acknowledges that only the reader can activate the intertext, and I

would argue that parody operates in a similar way. Hutcheon rightly points out that

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[127] Although Hutcheon separates parody from intertextuality in this text, she fuses the two in other texts, where she interchanges the terms freely (1988, 2002).

parody operates by inviting the reader to notice that something in particular (a text,

genre or trope) is being parodied, but neglects to consider the complexity of the

parodied object. A parody of the gothic-romance genre, for example, depends on other

texts and discourses such as feminism, mystery novels, romance novels, our view of the

past, and so on. Kenneth Burke notes the impossibility of controlling the associations

the reader will make with the text:

> The work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations. [S/]he uses
>
> 'associational clusters'. And you may, by examining [her/]his work, find 'what
>
> goes with what' in these clusters—what kinds of acts and images and
>
> personalities and situations go with [her/]his notions of heroism, villainy,
>
> consolation, despair, etc. And though [s/]he be perfectly conscious of the act of
>
> writing, conscious of selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain
>
> kind of mood, etc., [s/]he cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships
>
> among all these equations. (1941, 18)

Parodists, then, cannot either be conscious of, or control, all the 'interrelationships' in

their texts. The authority lies neither with the Author nor with the reader as an

individual; the reader is simply the destination of the multiple writings that make up the

text itself.

Hutcheon continually emphasises how the writer, author, producer or inferred

producer, manipulates and 'forces' the reader into reading in the desired way. Parody, in

her opinion, succeeds by being 'joined to manipulative narrative voices, overtly

addressing an inscribed receiver, or covertly maneuvering the reader into a desired

position from which intended meaning (recognition and then interpretation of parody,

for example) can be allowed to appear' (2000, 86). Certainly, texts offer certain

positions to the reader; more often than not these are positions from which they are most

easily intelligible. However, we need not necessarily occupy that position; the reader is

not 'forced' to read a text in any particular way; even if it is recognised that a particular genre or text is being parodied, the reader can disagree or read the text as it is not 'intended' to be read. Hutcheon, though, seems to view the positioning of the reader as a controlling device which cannot be resisted, and as something which is operated in an underhand fashion: 'being made to feel that we are actively participating in the generation of meaning is no guarantee of freedom; manipulators who make us feel in control are no less present for all their careful concealment' (2000, 92). This comment appears to lament the lack of 'freedom' in generating meaning. Freedom, however, is illusory. It can be linked here to Joan Foster's escapist fantasies. The reader is not 'free' to generate meaning, but does have a *choice* of meanings to choose from. The meanings in a text are not infinitely plural, but are open to a range of possible interpretations, none of which the reader can be 'forced' to see.

Parody may indeed differ from intertextuality by presenting 'obvious' signposts to the reader as to what is being parodied, but ultimately, the reader's interpretation cannot be 'controlled' by the writer because any text can be read in a number of ways. Hutcheon is concerned with the 'current' 'valorizing of the *reader*' and wishes to reinstate the authority of the writer (2000, 86). She treats the writer as an all-powerful presence who can give direction or selfishly make the reader stumble through the text: 'There is also a long tradition in parodic literature of placing readers in tricky positions and forcing them to make their own way. The rules, if the author is playing fair, are usually in the text itself' (2000, 92). I would argue that the author's intention or 'inferred' intention is irrelevant; ultimately, the writer has no authority over how the text should be read. To suggest that 'rules' in a text should be obeyed and navigated through by a reader not only implies authorial intention, but is also at odds with the idea that postmodern texts might operate without rules 'in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*' (Lyotard 1992, 24). *Lady Oracle*, in fact, explicitly offers

itself to be read in different and contradictory ways by being both comic and tragic. In a text, a writer can try to position the reader in certain ways or invite them to speculate on different questions, but the reader can never be 'forced' to do anything. Barthes asserts that 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (1977b, 147). Hutcheon's comments, whilst displaying nostalgia for authorial intention, also, and contradictorily, exhibit a wish for the reader of parody to be like Roland Barthes' ultimately impossible, ideal reader. She notes that for parody to work properly, 'the sophisticated subject would know the backgrounded work(s) well and would bring about a superimposition of texts by the mediation of that parodied work upon the act of viewing or reading. This act would parallel the parodist's own synthesis and would complete the circuit of meaning' (2000, 94).

Completed 'circuit[s] of meaning' are rejected in *Lady Oracle* in favour of multicursal mazes and loose threads. Although readers may know the conventions of the background works (not least because they are drawn attention to in the text itself), they cannot see exactly what the 'Author' might have intended for them to see. Only Barthes' ideal, hypothetical reader can see everything in a text; the ideal reader 'is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost' (1977b, 148). However, he makes clear that such a reader does not exist, because s/he is 'without history, biography, psychology'; readers' culture allows certain things to be seen in a text, which is read according to their history, biography, psychology; there are certain things readers cannot see at certain points in culture (Barthes 1977b, 148). Barthes, then, does not transfer all the authority the author was previously deemed to have to the reader, but points out that meanings always elude readers and only a utopian reader can hold 'together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted' (Barthes 1977b, 148). The reader works to produce the text and triggers productivity, 'inventing ludic meanings, even if the author of the

text had not foreseen them, and even if it was historically impossible for him to foresee them: the signifier belongs to everybody; it is the text which, in fact, works tirelessly' (Barthes 1981, 37).[128]

Lady Oracle parodies gothic romances, but does not 'force' readers to follow a straight, prescribed line; rather it offers readers different views on the genre. Stalked by Love's ending, which takes place in a maze, offers itself not as 'an (inductive) access to a Model, but an entrance into a network with a thousand entrances' (Barthes 1990, 12). Stalked by Love is printed in italics, distinguishing it from the rest of the text. The italics contribute to a sense of place: the word 'italic' comes from the latin 'italicus', meaning Italian.[129] Joan's secret hiding place is in Italy, the setting of many of the most famous gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe's A Sicilian Romance and The Mysteries of Udolpho, and Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto. Stalked by Love is not quite the 'original' costume gothic: it allows the reader to take an inclined or slanted look at the genre, not only by parodying it but also by presenting it in inclined print. Italics are also used to draw emphasis, and signal to the reader that Stalked by Love requires just as much attention as the rest of Lady Oracle.

One of the most obvious norms Lady Oracle offers readers resistance to is ideals of femininity, both in the costume gothics and in Joan's life. In Stalked by Love, the descriptions of characters are so clichéd as to have a comic effect. The female characters are products of early nineteenth-century patriarchal authority, and have internalised the belief that in everything women attempt, they should show their consciousness of dependence. Charlotte and Felicia are depicted in terms of the familiar

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[128] Worton and Still similarly emphasise that 'what is produced at the moment of reading is due to the cross-fertilisation of the packaged textual material [...] by all the texts which the reader brings to it. A delicate allusion to a work unknown to the reader, which therefore goes unnoticed, will have a dormant existence in that reading. On the other hand, the reader's experience of some practice or theory unknown to the author may lead to a fresh interpretation' (1990, 1-2).

[129] 'italic' - 1612, from L. italicus 'Italian'; so called because it was introduced in 1501 by Aldus Manutius, printer of Venice (who also gave his name to Aldine), and first used in an edition of Virgil dedicated to Italy. Earlier (1571) the word was used for the plain, sloping style of handwriting, as opposed to Gothic (Oxford English Dictionary).

binary opposition between virgin and whore. Charlotte is attractive, humble, and strongly resists any sexual advances from Redmond, while Felicia is tall, with flaming red hair, and moves with '*the sensuousness of a predatory animal*' (Atwood 1982, 31). According to the rules of the genre, Charlotte will be rewarded with the love and protection of the master of the house and the evil and sexually-aware Felicia will have to die; there is little room for this novel's characters or plot to manoeuvre. Considering how Charlotte is to escape the advances of Redmond, Joan muses: 'there were no library books around, no candelabra, no pokers from the fireplace she could hit him with; perhaps a good swift knee in the groin? But that was out of bounds in my books; it would have to be an interruption by a third party' (Atwood 1982, 188). The characters, then, like the plot, must stay within certain 'bounds', which Joan finds increasingly restrictive.

Joan's plans for the plot are permeated by words such as 'of course' and 'naturally', as if no other route is available. Her comments on Charlotte highlight how unattractive and unrealistic a model of 'ideal' femininity she is. Initially, she is figured as the kind of woman Joan longs to be, and recalls George Eliot's ironic description of such a 'noble, lovely and, gifted heroine', whom we see 'pass through many *mauvais moments*, but we have the satisfaction of knowing that her sorrows are wept into embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, that her fainting form reclines on the very best upholstery, and that whatever vicissitudes she may undergo [...] she comes out of them all with a complexion more blooming and locks more redundant than ever' (1990, 141). Charlotte represents the typical heroine of romance novels, who, more often than not, is 'perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues' (Eliot 1990, 140). It recalls for the reader Joan's earlier regret that she 'never learned to cry with style, silently, the pearl-shaped tears rolling down my cheeks from wide luminous eyes, as on the covers of *True Love* comics,

leaving no smears or streaks' (Atwood, 1982, 9). Throughout the text the ideals of femininity in gothic romances are shown to pervade contemporary advertising, magazines and Hollywood cinema. Although Joan has invested in this unattainable image of ideal femininity, such an identity gradually becomes less attractive to her: 'I was getting tired of Charlotte, with her intact virtue and her tidy ways. Wearing her was like wearing a hair shirt, she made me itchy, I wanted her to fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart' (Atwood 1982, 319).

The juxtaposition of *Stalked by Love* with *Lady Oracle* invites the reader to notice that while 'feminine' ideals may have changed slightly, they still operate today and interpellate subjects like Joan. Charlotte is like the lady Joan's mother wishes she could be; the text invites readers to consider that idealisation of restricted femininity does not only pervade gothic romances, but has also interpellated Joan's mother, who internalises her society's expectations of women and tries to enforce this upon Joan. Joan, in turn, tries to fulfil these expectations by trying to cook for Arthur; her attempts to be a domestic goddess, an 'angel in the house', are doomed to failure, though: 'Occasionally I neglected to produce any food at all because I had completely forgotten about it. I would wander into the kitchen at midnight to find Arthur making himself a peanut-butter sandwich and be overwhelmed with guilt at the implication that I'd been starving him. But though he criticized my cooking, he always ate it, and he resented its absence' (Atwood, 1982, 210).

As *Stalked by Love* progresses, reality and fiction become entwined, or in this case, fiction and fiction: Joan's story and her gothic novel become inseparable. Her desire for escape in her texts overtakes her grounding in her own life, inviting the reader to consider the distinction between art and life. The characters in *Stalked by Love* take on aspects of Joan and the people in her life. Felicia has Joan's physical characterisics and danger excites her. Charlotte, on the other hand, is like the new woman Joan

celebrates being after dyeing her hair in Italy: 'a sensible girl, discreet, warm, honest and confident, with soft green eyes, regular habits and glowing chestnut hair' (Atwood 1984, 184). Felicia's lover is called Otterly, reminiscent of the Royal Porcupine, and like Joan, she wishes her husband would notice that she is being unfaithful (Atwood 1982, 317).

The gothic-romance genre is parodied not only in *Stalked by Love*, but in *Lady Oracle* as a whole. The parody operates by means of the difference between the two texts, as well as their similarities. The principles of the genre are deflated when the reader confronts the reality of Joan's life. Joan flees from Arthur to begin a new life just as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* runs away from Rochester when she discovers he is already married. However, this time it is Joan who has lied: she has an affair and hides her novels from Arthur. When Joan sends a postcard to Arthur to tell him she is not really dead it is reminiscent of Jane Eyre and Rochester hearing each other's voices across the miles (Brontë 1996, 414). However, this romantic notion is completely deflated when Joan later realises that she has forgotten to send the postcard by air mail. These references to the everyday diminish any romantic illusions the reader may be tempted to engage in.

Gothic novels traditionally contain a motif of doubling: characters are the opposites of each other; good and evil are contrasted; the uncanny and the mystical are juxtaposed with the real. Ghosts haunt, but mysteries are generally explained at the end as figments of the characters' imaginations, or as resulting from criminal behaviour. *Lady Oracle* transforms these doubles into multiples and does not restore boundaries and social norms at the end. A number of the text's characters are doubled: John, the waiter, becomes Zordo, the restaurateur; Leda Sprott changes to E.P. Revele; the Royal Porcupine metamorphoses into Chuck Brewer. Two sides are shown to Joan's father: he is a submissive, patient husband but also his wife's possible killer. The Daffodil Man

ultimately prompts Joan to ask: 'Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?' (Atwood 1982, 64). This suggests not just doubling, but the dissolution of binary opposites, which cannot be held apart. The text doubles the tropes of gothic literature, but with a difference, changing the doubles to multiples.

One of Joan's doubles is presented in the spectre of the Fat Lady, which corresponds to gothic fiction's figuration of the 'other' in monstrous terms.[130] The Fat Lady is Joan's creation of herself as a monster; it is the unfeminine and excessive side of herself that she must repress and render inarticulate to reinforce and stabilise what is considered 'normal'. The feminine is traditionally associated with the underside of the Enlightenment and is represented in gothic novels in the form of visions, ghosts and monsters. In Shelley's arguably anti-enlightenment novel, *Frankenstein,* the female is eradicated by science: Frankenstein refrains from creating a female monster for fear that he will not be able to control her. Monster metaphors are revised and rewritten in *Lady Oracle*, in which Joan creates herself as a female monster.

In the final instalment of *Stalked by Love*, the Fat Lady makes her last appearance. When Felicia/Joan enters the centre of the maze, she meets her: *'She was wearing a pair of pink tights and a short pink skirt covered with spangles. From her head sprouted two antennae, like a butterfly's, and a pair of obviously false wings was pinned to her back'* (Atwood 1982, 341). The Fat Lady is one of four women encountered in the maze who represent parts of Joan; aspects of her subjectivity are symbolised by Felicia, Charlotte, Aunt Lou, and the Fat Lady. Throughout the text, Joan has tried to separate her 'selves', either by acting out one at a time, according to the circumstances and company she is in, or by obliterating them altogether in the hopes of

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[130] Joan frequently refers to herself as monstrous: When breaking up with Chuck Brewer, she 'felt like a monster, a large, blundering monster' (Atwood 1982, 271). Even when she is thin she still pictures herself as a 'beluga whale', a 'steamy walrus' and a 'giant popsicle' (Atwood 1982, 74, 283, 284). She also considers herself to be 'a kind of nourishing blob' for Arthur (Atwood 1982, 212).

a complete re-birth into the woman she thinks she should be. She has been a fat teenager, a thin adult, a writer of 'trashy' novels, the author of a 'feminist' poem, the wife of Arthur, and the Royal Porcupine's lover. In the last section of *Stalked by Love,* written at the point in the text when Joan has begun to identify with Felicia as the 'mad wife', Felicia is rescued from obliteration and Joan steps beyond the limitations of her own plot. Felicia/Joan is asked to dance by Redmond, who, the reader is invited to notice in intratextual references, represents all the men Joan has been involved with in her life. Joan, in Felicia's words, realises that she cannot and need not rely on the men in her life to lead and rescue her:

> *Redmond resumed his opera cloak. His mouth was hard and rapacious, his eyes smouldered. 'Let me take you away,' he whispered. 'Let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always.'*
>
> *'Always,' she said, almost yielding. 'Forever.' Once she had wanted these words, she had waited all her life for someone to say them . . . . She pictured herself whirling slowly across a ballroom floor, a strong arm around her waist*
>
> *. . . .*
>
> *'No,' she said. 'I know who you are.'* (Atwood 1982, 343)

Joan comes to the realisation that her fantasies of cloaked, heroic strangers are illusory and merely maintain her in a position of weakness; she resists the ideology of reliance that has influenced her for so long. At the end of the text, the figures are ghost-like: '*Wasn't their skin too white, weren't their eyes too vague. . .* ? She noticed that she could see the dim outline of the bench through their tenuous bodies' (Atwood 1982, 342). Even Redmond's face '*grew a white gauze mask, then a pair of mauve-tinted spectacles, then a red beard and moustache, which faded, giving place to burning eyes and icicle teeth*' (Atwood 1982, 342). Contrary to traditional gothic novels, in which such mysterious, ghostly apparitions are explained at the end, *Stalked by Love*

introduces these spectres in its final stages.[131] In this reconfigured text, such appearances are no longer terrifying as 'in our day [...] it is at the ghosts within us that we shudder, and not at the decaying bodies of barons or the subterranean activities of ghouls' (Woolf 1958, 59-60). Throughout *Lady Oracle*, Joan has shuddered at the 'ghosts within' her, and it is in this final scene of *Stalked by Love* that she realises, and the reader is invited to agree, that multiple subjectivities are a better alternative to the effort of trying to forge a non-contradictory, stable identity.

It is, significantly, in the space of the maze that this discovery is made. Earlier in the text, Joan notes that 'for Arthur there were true paths, several of them perhaps, but only one at a time. For me there were no paths at all. Thickets, ditches, ponds, labyrinths, morasses, but no paths' (Atwood 1982, 169). A maze is multicursal and offers a number of paths and choices to those who try to find their way through it. Joan's selves meet at the centre of the maze and remain there; rather than choose one particular path, they leave choices available at all times. The text reconceptualises female identity as an open range of possibilities, giving a plurality of perspectives on what 'woman' might be. The maze encourages the reader to see women as a labyrinth of multiple possibilities, as well being a metaphor for the maze of intertextual references that make up the text of *Lady Oracle*. When Felicia is told that the only way to escape the maze is through a doorway in which Redmond stands, she significantly rejects the option of escapism and chooses to remain at the centre of the maze.[132] The text can be conceived of as a space where multiplicity is embraced and the 'monological, legal status of signification' and, indeed, identity, is cast off and pluralised (Barthes 1981, 37). The maze is 'a polysemic space where the paths of several possible meanings intersect' and meaning is produced (Barthes 1981, 37). In the novel's rewriting of the

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[131] Ann Radcliffe, for example, was at pains 'to explain her mysteries when they [had] done their work. The human body "decayed and disfigured by worms, which were visible in the features and hands", turn[ed] out to be a waxen image credibly placed there in fulfilment of a vow' (Woolf 1958, 58).
[132] Stephen Benson reads this scene as a re-writing of 'Bluebeard' plots. Redmond represents marriage and death for the heroine, an option which she rejects (1996).

gothic romance genre, and the ideologies of 'ideal' femininity it presents, the reader is offered *different views* of femininity, romance, and subjectivity.

Respectful Parody: Mothers and Authors

The text's parody of restrictive femininity does not operate by means of a simple 'doubling', that is, by merely inviting readers to note the difference between what gothic romances espouse and alternative discourses. Like the space of the maze, the text's operation is multiple and more ambiguous; *Lady Oracle* and *Stalked by Love* rely on past texts in order to implement change but, in doing so, also signal a certain reverence for their parodied texts and genres. Parodic texts are inherently ambivalent because of 'the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces' that work simultaneously within them (Hutcheon 2000, 26).

The parodic style of *Lady Oracle* is rarely fully investigated by its critics.[133] Kim Worthington does identify the parody in the text as 'instructive' but, relying on Linda Hutcheon, defines parody as: 'an evaluative, self-consciously instructive stance which challenges various attitudes or assumptions through expository ridicule' (1996, 287). In an otherwise insightful argument, Worthington's definition of parody is restrictive and is also at odds with the way Hutcheon actually defines it. In her book *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon repeatedly emphasises that parody need not necessarily ridicule. She notes that the 'stubborn retention of the characteristic of ridicule or of the comic in most definitions of parody' is, in fact, 'a retention that modern parodic practice contests' (Hutcheon 2000, 26). She explains that parody 'is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. [...] The range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage' (Hutcheon 2000, 37). *Lady Oracle* parodies gothic and

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[133] Becker is one of few critics who deals with *Lady Oracle* as a parody of the gothic romance genre. She mentions that the parody might also be reverential, but nevertheless leaves room for a more sustained account of ridiculing and reverential parody in the novel (1999, 151).

romance genres in both ridiculing and respectful ways, marking its difference from

them while 'the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm—textually and

hermeneutically—the connection with the past' (Hutcheon 1988, 125)

The text's parody of the gothic genre ironically relies on and utilises its tropes of

hauntings and doublings; it is an appropriate genre in which to demonstrate the

incompleteness of any text, because 'the gothic novel tells us that everything is both

itself and something else' (Macherey 1978, 34). Furthermore, *Stalked by Love* draws

subtle attention to its own incoherence; it is permeated by ellipsis marks:

> *Dark shapes flitted by on either side, and from time to time she heard low,*
>
> *mocking laughter . . . . Daughters of sin, vile, abandoned creatures such as*
>
> *[Charlotte] herself might have become had she not struggled . . . . But perhaps*
>
> *she was now in even more danger.* (Atwood 1982, 163)

The inclusion of so much ellipsis in *Stalked by Love* highlights the contradictory nature

of classic realist texts. It draws attention to the text-in-process, literally the text as Joan

writes it, and her thought processes, in stark contrast to the classic realist novel, which

strives toward unity and coherence. These contradictions point to the split nature of the

text, to its unconscious, and to the limits of ideology in it. According to Macherey, this

conflict of meaning 'is not the sign of an imperfection; it reveals the inscription of an

otherness in the work, through which it maintains a relationship with that which it is

not, that which happens at its margins' (1978, 79). *Stalked by Love* refer to an

'otherness' operating in it; not only is it 'haunted' by other gothic texts, but is not a

stable, complete narrative. The text's parody does not 'destroy the past'; rather it

operates within and against the tropes and plots of gothic romance, simultaneously

working to 'enshrine the past and to question it' (Hutcheon 1988, 126).

Lady Oracle rewrites past literature, parodying certain texts, tropes and

ideologies in both ridiculing and reverential ways, and displays thereby a wish to create

a dialogue with the past. Parody is 'a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity', which displays a 'tension between the potentially conservative act of repetition and the potentially revolutionary impact of difference' (Hutcheon 2000, xii). The text's comic rewriting of gothic romance novels constitutes an inclusion, not an entire rejection, of the genre. Rather than engage in the illusion of creating an entirely new text, *Lady Oracle*, like both *The Dancers Dancing* and *Sexing the Cherry*, takes the literature of the past and reconfigures it and the meanings attached to it in a new context. The text then, reminds the reader of a wealth of literature that remains to be engaged with, as well as distancing itself from certain aspects of that literature. It engages in a dialogue with literature of the past, not to immortalise it, but to recirculate it in new contexts (Hutcheon 2000, 28).

Lady Oracle ridicules the weak women of gothic literature and their happy-ever-after endings based on marriage; however, it simultaneously and ironically highlights writing, even the writing of 'trashy' novels, as an avenue to women's assertion of financial independence. Joan ensures her financial freedom by writing costume gothics; her rent, plane tickets and many other things, are affordable due only to the income she receives from writing novels. Ironically, gothic romances often portray women as passive, docile, and at the mercy of men, but in *Lady Oracle* they actually provide Joan with an income and financial independence. The fact that Joan becomes financially secure by writing such novels, as well as the circumstances in which she writes them, recalls Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf muses on the effects of material life on creativity and makes clear that the right circumstances are needed in order to write:

> Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. [...] These webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to

grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (1945, 43)

Lady Oracle shows that even decades after Woolf's polemic, not much has changed for some women. Joan always encounters difficulties in writing her novels: when she moves in with Arthur she has neither time nor space to complete *Escape From Love*; Arthur's flatmate pawns her typewriter; and she ends up escaping to the library to complete the romance with 'cheap yellow notepads and a ballpoint pen' (Atwood, 1982, 175). In fact, her only place of refuge is the bathroom, 'the only room in the house, all the houses, where [she] could lock the door' (Atwood 1982, 283). Joan must create countless excuses to find the time and space to write her novels.

Her situation is similar to that of many previous women novelists, but for different reasons. She does not have her own space to write, creates a pseudonym, and keeps her writing a secret. This recalls, of course, George Eliot, Jane Austen, and many others. Virginia Woolf quotes from the memoirs of the nephew of Jane Austen, in which he says of his aunt: 'she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party' (1945, 67). Like Austen, who 'hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting paper', Joan hides her manuscripts in suitcases and in her underwear drawer (Atwood 1982, 172, 30). In the nineteenth century 'it was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women. [...] Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man' (Woolf 1945, 51-52). Unlike previous female writers, Joan did not have to create a pseudonym or keep her novels secret because it may have been considered above her intellectual station to write novels. Rather, similar to readers such as Catherine Morland, she feels

that her genre will be looked down upon, that she cannot meet the high expectations of society, and especially of Arthur. In the 1970s her situation is not so entirely different from one hundred and fifty years before. Gothic-romance novels are still considered 'trashy'.

Stalked by Love parodies the gothic-romance genre's treatment of wives and mothers, questioning their obliteration from those texts, whilst simultaneously engaging in a dialogue with female writers of the past, or metaphorical 'mothers'. In the traditional texts, wives are dead, mad, or imprisoned; Joan is aware of these restrictions but begins to question them:

> Sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely. I was experienced enough to know that. If she'd only been a mistress instead of a wife, her life could have been spared; as it was, she had to die. In my books all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both. But what had she ever done to deserve it? (Atwood 1982, 319)

Felicia is not killed off, but is symbolically resurrected to act as the protagonist in the final section. The text also addresses the genre's stereotyping and ultimate denial of mothers. Charlotte's mother is weak and her hopes for her daughter are based on her procuring the right husband. Charlotte recalls her dying words: *'She had smiled at Charlotte, a single tear rolling down her cheek, and had made her promise to always tell the truth, to be pure, circumspect and obedient. "When the right man appears, my darling," she had said, "you will know it; your heart will tell you"'* (Atwood 1982, 127). This echoes the appearance of Jane Eyre's mother in a dream to advise her daughter to flee from the married Rochester: 'My daughter, flee temptation' (Brontë 1996, 316). Mothers are granted temporary and fleeting roles in such novels, and only as loving figures, who support and advise their daughters. Joan, like Charlotte has, in a sense, been orphaned; not because her mother has died a noble death, but because she

has let her know that she was an unwanted child. In comparison to Jane Eyre's mother, Joan's mother's 'astral body' does not appear from beyond the grave to offer advice or comfort, but constitutes a threatening presence. *Lady Oracle* suggests that mothers may not be naturally nurturing and caring individuals, and pokes fun at Charlotte's mother's death scene by juxtaposing it with Joan's visions of her mother. Joan's mother has a strong presence in the text, even after her death. She is not forgotten, like mothers in gothic-romance texts, but is confronted by Joan at the end. Rather than being killed off, mothers are acknowledged, both in terms of actual mothers and literary mothers; they represent a past to be confronted and dealt with in order to move on.[134] The voices of dead mothers come through in *Lady Oracle, Stalked by Love*, and the texts they parody. Rather than parodying a canonical, traditionally male-authored genre, the novel challenges and incorporates a marginalized 'feminine' fictional form.

Body Boundaries

Just as *Stalked by Love* cannot be stabilised, seems to exceed its own boundaries, and cannot be separated from *Lady Oracle* as a whole, Joan's body is never whole or stable, never remains within its borders. There are frequent references to tears, defecation, and vomiting in the text. After meeting Marlene as an adult, Joan cries in a toilet cubicle: 'helpless with self-pity, snorting and blowing [her] nose' (Atwood 1982, 229). When she makes up with the Royal Porcupine after an argument, she cries: 'I put my arms around him, oozing tears like an orphan, like an onion, like a slug sprinkled with salt' (Atwood 1982, 268). Apart from tears, there are also numerous references to menstruation: Aunt Lou works for 'a sanitary napkin company' answering letters from 'girls wanting to know where their vagina is and things like that' (Atwood 1982, 86). In

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[134] Sue Ann Johnston analyses Joan's relationship with her mother. The daughter tries to escape the mother and what she represents, but ultimately must return to the mother to find 'the daughter in the mother' (1984).

school, the boys laugh at the 'curse' that comes upon the Lady of Shalott: 'Why did boys think blood running down a girl's leg was funny? Or was it terror that made them laugh?' (Atwood 1982, 143). Joan's mother puts laxatives in her food, Joan overeats until she needs to vomit, and her skin is penetrated by an arrow and a knife (Atwood 1982, 87, 116, 124). There is also a sense that Joan herself cannot identify the borders of her body. The frequent references to her clumsiness do not cease even after she has lost weight: as a child she is banished to the basement to practise her ballet after she knocks over her mother's lamp and is forbidden from domestic chores for fear of what she will damage. However, her clumsiness continues into adulthood; her first encounters with both Paul and Arthur are accidents: she literally bumps into Arthur and meets the Polish Count when she falls off a bus. Similarly, in some of Joan's dances, she transgresses the space allotted to her body and challenges its restriction.

The boundaries of her body are unstable, just as the separation between her mind and body is deconstructed in the text. When she is fat there is a thin ballerina trapped inside and when she is thin the shadow of her former body seems to surround her. Even after physically losing weight, Joan remains a prisoner of her former overweight self; upon meeting Marlene as an adult she feels sick to her stomach: 'Wads of fat sprouted on my thighs and shoulders, my belly bulged out like a Hubbard squash, a brown wool beret popped through my scalp, bloomers coated my panic-stricken loins' (Atwood 1982, 229). After her marriage to Arthur, from whom she keeps her 'former self' a secret, she remains haunted by visions of her past: 'The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the images of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own. I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me; it waited for sleep, then cornered me' (Atwood 1982, 214). Joan's efforts to repress the past and to form a coherent, non-contradictory self, are shown to be futile, and are eventually replaced by a realisation that subjectivity can be multiple.

Joan's overweight body was the 'disputed territory' in the war she waged against her mother: she employs her body to resist her mother and the ideologies of femininity that she tries to impose upon her. Her obesity forms an armour, both against her mother and against feeling invisible. It is when her mother blames herself that doubts are triggered in Joan's mind: 'She was taking all the credit for herself, I was not her puppet; surely I was behaving like this not because of anything she had done but because *I wanted to*' (Atwood 1982, 88, my emphasis). Despite Joan's efforts to control and use her body for specific ends, its interpretation depends on the viewer. It soon transpires that her resistance to social discourses on femininity is only useful against her mother: 'strangers were different, they saw my obesity as an unfortunate handicap, like a hump or a club foot, rather than the refutation, the victory it was, and watching myself reflected in their eyes shook my confidence' (Atwood 1982, 74). Not only is her body read in different ways by different people, but it also displays the invasion of presence into absence and vice versa. Joan explains that she 'developed the habit of clomping silently but very visibly through rooms in which my mother was sitting; it was a sort of fashion show in reverse, it was a display, I wanted her to see and recognize what little effect her nagging and pleas were having' (Atwood 1982, 71). Joan imposes her silent, yet very visible presence to assert herself in a situation where she feels unwanted and invisible: 'Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there, I was an accident; I'd heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me?' (Atwood 1982, 78).

At the same time, her overweight body makes her absent in some ways: 'fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they're less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away' (Atwood 1982, 82). After she loses weight, Joan misses the protection of her large body and does not know how to respond to the advances of men; she

longed to be fat again. It would be an insulation, a cocoon. Also it would be a

disguise. I could be merely an onlooker again, with nothing too much expected

of me. Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility I felt naked, pruned,

as though some essential covering was missing. (Atwood 1982, 141)

Joan's body stages the deconstruction of a binary opposition between absence and

presence; each invades the other, just as Derrida has shown that writing (as absence)

invades speech (as presence). Joan appears to have control over her body, employing it

as a tool which acts out the plans she hatches in her mind, just as writing, in Western

Metaphysical logic, has traditionally been thought to be inferior to speech: 'Writing

would thus have the exteriority that one attributes to utensils; to what is even an

imperfect tool and a dangerous, almost maleficent, technique' (Derrida 1997, 34).

When the Fat Lady begins to haunt Joan, and when her thin body 'feels' fat to

her, the opposition between mind and body, presence and absence, begins to be

deconstructed: 'writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered

by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech,

and to the logos' and as 'sensible matter and artificial exteriority: a "clothing"' [...], a

dress of corruption which veils the appearance of language, so pure in speech' (Derrida

1997, 35). *Lady Oracle* calls this boundary between absence (writing and the body) and

presence (mind/spirit and speech) into question, suggesting that 'the outside bears with

the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning

of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside and

vice versa' (Derrida 1997, 35).

Dancing Bodies

The body as a 'simple exteriority' is also rebutted in some of Joan's dances; they do not

display an absolute union of body and mind, but call into question the boundary

between them. They display thoughtful action, or a movement of embodied mind, which

'offers the possibility of a distinctive mode of action, a mode of action embracing a

conception of the body which is not shadowed by habits of thought based on Cartesian

dualism' (Dempster 1995, 24). Joan's mothball rage dance and her final dance do not

symbolically 'express' what she thinks or feels, but display thoughtful action. Just as

writing is not the poorer or corrupt expression of speech, the dancing body does not

simply communicate when words are not enough, but testifies to the unpresentable.

Dancing is a pervasive motif in *Lady Oracle* in terms both of the dancing body and the

dancing text. Most critics briefly mention the references to dance but none have

investigated them thoroughly.[135] Dance pervades the novel thematically, as well as

intertextually and offers access to Joan's subjectivity as it changes, or dances

throughout the text. Like the body of the text, the dancing body and multifarious

subjectivities cannot be stabilised and constantly undergo changes.

The overweight Joan fell in love with dancing at a young age, particularly ballet

dancing:

> I loved dancing school. I was even quite good at the actual dancing. [...] Like
>
> most little girls of that time I idealized ballet dancers, it was something girls could
>
> do, and I used to press my short piggy nose up against jewelry store windows and
>
> goggle at the china music-box figurines of shiny ladies in brittle pink skirts, with
>
> roses on their hard ceramic heads, and imagine myself leaping through the air,
>
> lifted by a thin man in black tights, light as a kite. (Atwood 1982, 43)

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[135] Emily Jensen deals with the novel's intertextual dance references in more detail than any other critic of
the text, but her reading is limited. She concludes that Joan's final dance signals her inability to resist
reliance on male approval (1986).

Dancing, for Joan, is associated with this image of being lifted and supported by a male

partner. According to Susan Brownmiller, 'the idealization of gender-related movement

is romantically expressed in the *pas de deux* of classic ballet, where certain conventions

are never broken' (1986, 141). Joan associates the image with feeling 'as light as a kite'.

However, the dancer in the store window in the 'brittle' skirt is made of hard porcelain

and is confined within a box, the lid of which may be closed upon her at any time,

which is what ballet ultimately comes to represent for Joan. Ballet appealed to Joan

because it was 'something girls could do', but eventually it constricts her, placing her in

humiliating situations orchestrated by her mother and dance teacher.

Miss Flegg, in fact, is more than a dance teacher; she is a militant leader of

young girls, as the vocabulary used to describe her classes suggests: 'the teaching of

elementary steps to young children [...] was largely a matter of drill' (Atwood 1982,

44). Miss Flegg organises her students into soldier-like rows according to their ages:

'Teenies, Tallers, Tensies, Tweeners and Teeners' (Atwood 1982, 44). She gives out

orders in a militant style, unnerving Joan with the demanding words: 'You'll do as I say

or you won't be in the dance at all. Do you understand?' (Atwood 1982, 49). It is quite

appropriate that the ballet school is located above a butcher's shop, indicating that there

is little difference between the two; both slice, cut and mould products to be brought

before the public for approval, with equal force and fierceness. At the ballet spring

recital, all the students are required to wear similar costumes for each dance. Like

soldiers, the children must line up on stage in their uniforms and move in step with each

other. The dances themselves are also figured in military terms: 'Tulip Time', for

example, was 'a Dutch ballet routine for which we had to line up with partners and

move our arms up and down to simulate windmills'; and 'Anchors Aweigh' was 'a tap

dance with quick turns and salutes' (Atwood 1982, 45). The text's inclusion of soldierly

vocabulary in a description of ballet dancing calls on the popular conception of ballet as

a disciplined, somewhat elitist mode of dance. Although I will argue that certain dances

provide opportunities for multiple subjectivies in the text, in this case ballet represents

confinement, conformity and regimentation.

Margery Fee notes that 'ballet, although it requires a good deal of muscle and

prowess, is designed to disguise the effort, and the main reason these girls are enrolled

is to make them graceful and appealing to watch, to ready them for the gaze of the hero'

(1993, 54).[136] Believing themselves to be powerful, Joan's mother and Miss Flegg

perpetuate the very ideologies that make life as women difficult for them. Ballet, Joan's

first experience of dancing, focuses on appearances, competition, and beauty. The ballet

classes encourage the girls to develop an adult grace and proficiency, a skill from which

Joan is excluded, or simply cannot master. When she is forced to dress as a moth instead

of a butterfly at the spring recital, she is pointedly advised that she does not meet the

standard expected of her by society. The other children's infiltration by patriarchal

ideals of femininity is reminiscent of 'the eighteenth-century practice in Britain

whereby a debutante was rigorously trained to take the floor at her first ball in an

exhibition minuet before the critical gaze of the assembled company' (Spencer 1985, 8).

Like a debutante, Joan is enrolled in dance classes in the hope that she will emerge a

standardized, presentable and respectable 'lady', accepted as socially and physically

'normal'. She is registered for the classes by her mother, 'partly because it was

fashionable to enrol seven-year-old girls in dancing schools—Hollywood musicals were

still popular—and partly because Joan's mother hoped it would make [her] less chubby'

(Atwood 1982, 43). When Joan finds that she does not adhere to the ideal image of a

ballerina, though, she does not give up on dancing, but changes its terms temporarily

instead.

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[136] Dempster asserts that 'the would-be ballerina is encourages to compare herself (unceasingly) to an image of a never-to-be-attained perfection. [...] In the classical dance the spectator is invited to gaze upon a distanced, ideal world where the female dancer is traced as sylph and cipher, a necessary absence (1995, 33).

Although the dance classes are used by Joan's mother and Miss Flegg to assert

power and control over young girls, Joan's mothball 'rage dance' embodies what

Foucault terms 'power from below' (1979, 62). Joan shows that she can indeed dance;

her steps are spontaneous, and allow a concerted display of emotion and anger to take

place. She subverts the space of the ballet recital as an exercise in control and social

grooming, and asserts her resistance to it from within the same mode. Restrictive,

choreographed dance is replaced by and transformed into a spontaneous, cathartic

exhibition.[137] Joan's rage dance communicates what she dare not say to her mother and

Miss Flegg:

> There were no steps to my dance, as I hadn't been taught any, so I made it up as
>
> I went along. I swung my arms, I bumped into the butterflies, I spun in circles
>
> and stamped my feet as hard as I could on the boards of the flimsy stage, until it
>
> shook. I threw myself into the part, it was a dance of rage and destruction.
>
> (Atwood 1982, 50)

Relying on the mode of dance itself, she creates her own steps, which are at odds with

the gracefulness and refinement of ballet. The chaotic, energised steps allow her to act

out what is forbidden in Miss Flegg's dance school. The full force of her body asserts

her presence in a situation where she feels repressed; bumping into the ballerinas on the

stage, she literally shakes the ground they are based upon. Joan has been instructed to

look 'as much like a mothball as possible' by Miss Flegg, who evidently implies that

she should shrink from the limelight and stay in one position so as not to be noticed

(Atwood 1982, 50). Joan, though, interprets these words in a different way and stages

her mothball dance; with no pattern to adhere to as she 'hadn't been taught any', she

resists the cultural discipline and triumphantly steals the limelight from the butterflies,

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[137] See Paul Spencer for a discussion of dance as cathartic. He notes that dance as a therapeutic activity is 'at least as ancient as the dancing epidemics of the Middle Ages'. In the poorer communities of Europe during the Middle Ages, certain symptoms of ill-health were believed to be lessened by performing a contorted form of dancing (1985, 3).

who 'scampered away on cue' (Atwood 1982, 50). The butterflies are dancers who comply with existing norms and conceptions of femininity; Joan, whether consciously or not, challenges such prescriptions and 'seek[s] transformation of the terms of exchange' to which she has been subject (Dempster 1995, 25). Her resistance is temporary, though: despite her apparent success and the vigorous applause she receives from the audience, she vows never to return to dancing school and cries over her 'thwarted wings' (Atwood 1982, 51)

Nevertheless, this episode and the termination of her ballet lessons does not put an end to Joan's interest and romantic investment in dancing; influenced by romantic fairy tales, novels and Hollywood cinema, she continues to dance in various ways. The first mention of dance in the novel is as a refuge for the adult Joan; Arthur has made her so self-conscious of her appearance that she has to escape to her bedroom to dress up:

> I would dab myself with perfume, take off my shoes, and dance in front of the mirror, twirling slowly around, waltzing with an invisible partner. A tall man in evening dress, with an opera cloak and smouldering eyes. As he swept me in circles (bumping occasionally into the dressing table or the end of the bed) he would whisper, 'Let me take you away. We will dance together, always.' It was always a great temptation, despite the fact that he wasn't real....
>
> Arthur would never dance with me, even in private. He said he had never learned. (Atwood 1982, 23)

Joan has internalised the ideology of the romantic novels she has read since childhood, which similarly provided her with refuge and comfort. Her dreams of romance, mysterious strangers, and of being literally swept off her feet, though present primarily in romance novels and Hollywood cinema, are shown to pervade her consciousness in the contemporary world. Twirling and waltzing alone in her bedroom, her dance, like her early visions of being a ballerina, is still figured in terms of being rescued,

supported and led by a male dancing partner. With an imaginary partner, she performs a waltz, a dance that traditionally requires the female dancer to be led and guided by a male who decides on the speed, rhythm and direction of the dance. Although she has the potential to daydream differently, Joan remains bound up in an ideology of dependence on phantom male strangers.

As a writer of gothic-romance novels, she admires the old-fashioned ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her dreams of dancing with a male partner recall the traditional focus of the beginnings of many relationships in romance novels. In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, for example, the relationships of the main characters are formed in the assembly rooms in Bath, where men may confirm their interest in particular ladies by inviting them to dance. Henry Tilney explains the resemblance between matrimony and dancing to Catherine Morland:

> You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the
>
> power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman,
>
> formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong
>
> exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution. (Austen 1995, 70)

The notion that the man has the 'advantage of choice' where dance and marriage are concerned is addressed in *Lady Oracle*. Joan's mother persistently tells her not to expect any man to marry her if she does not lose weight, and Joan thinks her mothball dance useless because 'who would think of marrying a mothball?' (Atwood 1982, 51). Men hold the power to dash or fulfil Joan's hopes both in life and on the dance-floor; their approval and interest are aspired to in much of the text, whilst readers are invited to criticise this dependency. The intertextual references in the novel highlight the investment Joan makes in romantic love, dancing with handsome strangers, and happy-ever-afters.

Despite dance's early equation with predictable romantic plots, references to it nevertheless make the text's form and content dance. Joan regularly goes to the cinema with her Aunt Lou—her favourite film is *The Red Shoes* 'with Moira Shearer as a ballet dancer torn between her career and her husband' (Atwood 1982, 82). The 1948 film, *The Red Shoes*, is itself a locus of other texts; it is a modern retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Red Shoes' and contains within it 'The Ballet of the Red Shoes', based on Andersen's tale. The film, like the ballet within it, has the same ending as the fairy tale. The fable becomes reality, life imitates art, but even that 'life' is fiction. Like *The Red Shoes*, *Lady Oracle* blends art and life, but breaks the cycle of the Andersen tale when Joan survives her final dance with her feet and mind intact.

Andersen's story tells of Karen, a little girl whose guardian, an almost blind old woman, buys a pair of red shoes for her. She wears them to church for her confirmation, where the parson tells her she must be a good Christian, 'but the red shoes were all that Karen thought about' (Andersen 1961, 273). When the old woman is informed that Karen wore red shoes to church, she 'said it was very naughty and most improper and in future when Karen went to church she must always go in black shoes' (Andersen, 1961, 273). Karen continues to disobey and fool the old woman and later chooses to wear the red shoes to a ball instead of attending to her guardian in her dying hours. Once she starts dancing though, the shoes will not let her stop and eventually she pleads with an executioner to chop off her feet. She goes to work in a parsonage with her new wooden feet until she is eventually forgiven by God, after which her soul ascends to heaven. The fairy tale teaches that if elders, and patriarchy in the form of the church, are not respected and their rules adhered to, terrible punishments will follow. The girl is punished for prioritising her art over the responsibilities society tells her she must fulfil, much like Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes*.

Joan's love of dancing cannot be pinned down to the fairy tale, the film, or the ballet, which at times are so interwoven that they cannot even be distinguished from each other. Many other fairy tales apart from 'The Red Shoes', play a part in *Lady Oracle*; like *Sexing the Cherry*, the novel also refers to 'The Little Mermaid', another of Andersen's stories in which a girl sacrifices her art (her voice) for a handsome prince, and ultimately ends up dying:

> Perhaps, I thought, I had no soul; I just drifted around, singing vaguely, like the Little Mermaid in the Andersen fairy tale. In order to get a soul you had to suffer, you had to give something up; or was that to get legs and feet? I couldn't remember. She'd become a dancer, though, with no tongue. Then there was Moira Shearer, in *The Red Shoes*. Neither of them had been able to please the handsome prince; both of them had died. (Atwood 1982, 216)

References to fairy tales are not confined to *The Red Shoes* or 'The Little Mermaid'; the text also introduces themes from *Cinderella*. Joan considers herself to be a fairy godmother to the readers of her costume gothics: 'Now I could play fairy godmother to them. [...] I had the power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold. [...] Why refuse them their castles, their persecutors and their princes?' (Atwood 1982, 35). In her dances with the Royal Porcupine, though, she begins to resemble Cinderella's 'ugly sister' more than her fairy-godmother, squeezing her feet into shoes in order to dance with her 'prince'. The fairytale dream begins to disintegrate when she has to squash her feet into old washerwoman boots rather than slip into a pair of elegant dancing shoes:

> They hadn't sold because they were odd sizes, and I had to sit down on the curb and let the Royal Porcupine try to cram my feet into each pair [...]. I felt like Cinderella's ugly sister. The only pair I could get on were black lace-ups with steel toes, washerwoman boots, but even these were desirable. (Atwood 1982, 255)

The Royal Porcupine, Joan's 'cloaked stranger', is surrounded by an air of mystery,

until it emerges that he works as a part-time commercial artist and wants to set up house

with her. In a reversal of the classic fairy tale's metamorphosis of a frog into a prince,

the Royal Porcupine turns into Chuck Brewer; Joan's somewhat hopeful investment in

his heroic status is dashed when he shaves off his beard, without which 'he had the chin

of a junior accountant' (Atwood, 1982, 271). As the Royal Porcupine turns into ordinary

Chuck, Joan notices that the thrill of dancing with him is no longer the same:

'something was changing. The lace tablecloth in which I waltzed with him was turning

itself back into a lace tablecloth, with a rip in it; the black pointed boots were no longer

worth the pain they inflicted' (Atwood 1982, 267). Joan's romantic fairytale dances

dissolve, as if she is figured as a Cinderella figure who has stayed at the ball past

midnight. Dreams of dancing with handsome princes and of happy endings dissipate;

the magic does not last. The text's juxtaposition of fairy tales with 'reality', shows that

the ideology of such texts can encourage an investment in fantasies which lead to

disappointment. *Lady Oracle* demystifies and exposes the ideology in fairy tales, films,

myths, and gothic literature, which encourages women to dance only with male

saviours.

It is, nevertheless, in the space of the dance that Joan learns to resist such beliefs

and to embrace her multiple and contradictory subjectivity. In the course of the text she

occupies a range of subject positions, but each one is always at the expense of the

others. Although Joan's belief in her ability to change might be perceived as positive,

her downfall lies in thinking that she must forge an entirely new, unalterable, stable

identity. She spends most of her life aspiring to be a consistent individual, but this leads

to pretence and the suppression and denial of aspects of her subjectivity. After her

weight loss, Joan tries to start her life from zero and invents different pasts for herself,

which she feels 'match' her new image: 'I was the right shape, but I had the wrong past.

I'd have to get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for myself, a more

agreeable one' (Atwood 1982, 141). She tells Paul that she has come to London to study

art, and constructs stories for Arthur too: 'The story I told Arthur later, about being

seduced under a pine tree at the age of sixteen, by a summer camp sailing instructor

from Montreal, was a lie' (Atwood 1982, 149). Joan separates her past and present, her

career and home life, and lives in constant fear that she her deceptions will be

uncovered. She marries Arthur, terrified that he will find out about her past and her

career, and eventually resorts to faking her own death rather than admit the truth(s).

After marrying Arthur, Joan uses her identity as Louisa K Delacourt as an

escape mechanism:

> As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all
>
> right, I was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if I was cut
>
> off, if I couldn't work at my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and
>
> irritable, drink too much and start to cry. (Atwood 1982, 213)

Although Joan's multiple selves appear to provide her with a way to deal with

pressures, eventually they begin to affect her negatively, not only because she must

keep them secret, but primarily because she feels that none are completely 'real'.

Compared to the Little Mermaid and Moira Shearer, though, she counts herself lucky:

'Their mistake had been to go public, whereas I did my dancing behind closed doors'

(Atwood 1982, 216). She considers herself quite 'adult' for keeping her selves separate

(Atwood 1982, 216). The freedom to embrace different aspects of herself must only be

found in secret, for fear of the consequences, both for herself and others. She admits that

she wants to be acknowledged, instead of always sitting on the 'sidelines' as she did in

high school:

> But I feared it. If I brought the separate parts of my life together (like uranium,
>
> like plutonium, harmless to the naked eye, but charged with lethal energies)

surely there would be an explosion. Instead I floated, marking time (Atwood 1982, 217).

The problematic nature of Joan's situation lies in her belief that she must portray a stable, unified identity to those who know her, especially Arthur. She maintains his illusions for him, cooking for him, supporting him, and acting out traditionally feminine roles. When she discovers a scorpion in her bathroom in Terremoto, she swiftly and fearlessly deals with it, admitting, though, 'if Arthur had been there I would have screamed' (Atwood 1982, 24-25). As time progresses, Joan realises that her life is more than double, that it is multiple: 'There was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin [...]. But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple' (Atwood 1982, 246). Several characters in the text represent these different facets of Joan: Charlotte, Felicia, the Fat Lady, Moira Shearer, Louisa K. Delacourt, and the Lady of Shalott, among them. It is at the end of the text, in the space of the dance, and in the space of the maze in *Stalked by Love* that Joan finally embraces her ability to occupy multiple, contradictory subject positions.

Joan's final dance scene occurs directly before her final instalment of *Stalked by Love*. The reader is offered the possibility that the problems presented in the dance are resolved in the maze. The text does not offer an absolute solution for Joan or the reader but encourages the reader to link both texts. Joan's final dance is brought on by her plans to 'escape' again, this time with the realization that her fantasies often turn into traps: 'although I was frightened, I was feeling curiously light-hearted. Danger, I realized, did this to me' (Atwood 1982, 334). She makes the decision to dance only for herself in future:

> From now on, I thought, I would dance for no one but myself. May I have this
> waltz? I whispered. I raised myself onto my bare toes and twirled around,
> tentatively at first. The air filled with spangles. I lifted my arms and swayed

them in time to the gentle music, I remembered the music, I remembered every

step and gesture. It was a long way down to the ground from here; I was a little

dizzy. I closed my eyes. Wings grew from my shoulders, an arm slid around my

waist...

Shit. I'd danced right through the broken glass, in my bare feet too. Some

butterfly. (Atwood, 334-335)

She washes her feet afterwards: 'the soles looked as if they'd been minced. The real red

shoes, the feet punished for dancing' (Atwood 1982, 335). Although she begins to dance

only for herself, Joan falls into her old ways by imagining an arm around her waist,

which is, significantly, the point at which she cuts her feet. It is not her decision to

dance by herself that results in her feet bleeding here, but her lapse into a romantic

script with patterned steps. The romantic, soothing imagery and language is starkly

interrupted by her painful accident.

Initially appearing to offer the reader a predictable ending where Joan gains

graceful independence, rather like that of Charlotte in *Stalked by Love*, the text soon

removes this therapeutic solution when her feet are cut. Joan's comments following her

accident refer to *The Red Shoes*:

You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid

to dance, because you had this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your

feet off so 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 too, because you

wanted to dance. (Atwood 1982, 335)

If dance is taken to imply multiple subjectivity—the ability to be dynamic and versatile,

to move and change, to take the initiative and play many roles—these comments

summarise Joan's realisation that society expects her to be a certain type of person. The

comment also implies that society in general may not approve of women 'dancing' by

and for themselves, an ideology that women internalise, an unspoken rule. When Moira Shearer dances 'The Ballet of the Red Shoes' she dances her fate; like the little girl in Andersen's tale, she dances to her death and has her feet cut off. However, Joan resists this fate, and in doing so, resists aspects of the texts and ideologies to which she is subject. The fact that her feet are cut the first time she dances for herself alone implies that she may not have chosen the easiest option, but wounds heal. After just a few hours, she bounces back and limps around her room, her sense of humour intact: 'The Little Mermaid rides again, I thought, the big mermaid rides again' (Atwood 1982, 336). The reader is invited to consider that Joan will not give up easily and will continue to dance for herself. The final instalment of *Stalked by Love*, in which Felicia recognises the danger of picturing '*herself whirling slowly across a ballroom floor, a strong arm around her waist*', is written after Joan's final dance (Atwood 1982, 343). The reader is offered the possibility that Joan, considering what she has just written, will no longer wish for an arm to slide around her waist when she dances in future. Joan's balcony dance 'generates a sense of being in the midst of a crisis, a break, a rupture, even a loss and a prospect at the same time'; it presents her cut feet as the result of a break from norms previously adhered to, yet offers the prospect that she might learn to dance for herself in future, inviting readers to do so too (Martin 1998, 1).

Until her final dance, Joan's experiences of dancing have been performed according to imposed narratives. In her ballet classes, the performances told certain tales, by means of specific movements and costumes. With the Royal Porcupine, she danced a fairytale narrative, pretending to be a character in a set narrative structure. It is only in the final dance on her balcony that Joan constructs her own narrative. In a spontaneous outburst, she does not dance to anyone else's tune, but rather constructs one for herself. There is more emphasis on the process than the finished product; she dances her own steps. Dance itself plays a strong role in encouraging the reader to

imagine the multiple perspectives of the twirling dancer. Peter Brinson asserts that dance 'cannot have the immediate impact of a politically contrived play or public speech in changing attitudes'; however, using the powers of imagery, it can 'directly stimulate political and social action. [...] Like other nonverbal arts, as a creature of climate, dance can generate feelings and emotions leading to the creation of ideas for action' (1985, 208). Just as the dance affects Joan's subjectivity, it may encourage readers to consider multiple, dancing subjectivity as a positive alternative to the illusion of autonomous, stable identity.

Her dance is postmodern because there is an element of undecidability to it; its interpretation depends on its juxtaposition with Felicia's final words in *Stalked by Love*. Joan, like the text, does not try to create something entirely new, but uses a mode already established and changes it within a new context. David Levin asserts that in postmodern dance there is 'no pre-established, predetermined groundplan, no already fixed choreography [or] [...] Master Choreographer, originating and orchestrating every gesture and movement like an absolute sovereign or god. There [is] no privileged standpoint or viewpoint for experiencing and interpreting the work' (1990, 225). Joan's performance refutes authority, pre-designed patterns and set dance steps, as well as taking dance out of its traditional confines. The studio of Miss Flegg, the privacy of bedrooms, and the secrecy of the Royal Porcupine's flat are exchanged for a balcony exposed to the outdoors, a space between the inside and the outside, in which neither is privileged. Joan takes her first dance steps for herself in Terremoto. The Italian word 'terremoto' means 'earthquake': the Italian 'terra' means ground, land, or earth, while 'moto' means motion. This place of movement is, significantly, the location where Joan realises she need not always be positioned on terra firma.

Joan's dance on the balcony, where she decides to dance for herself alone, displays the body's exercise of unconscious determinations. It invites the reader to

reflect that what makes 'The Red Shoes' such a horrifying story is that in it, feet literally dance all by themselves, erasing consciousness, separating mind and body. At the same time, Joan's dance rebuts the notion of the dancing body as a 'tool' for the expression of emotions and ideas; it is, rather, an improvised choreography which yields unpremeditated results. Improvised dancing does not partake in the binary opposition between conscious and unconscious; 'instead, improvisers can craft their composition at the same time that they allow opportunities for the unanticipated to emerge' (Foster 1998, 15). By improvising, Joan dedicates herself to 'the creation and resolution of hazardous corporeal dilemmas' (Foster 1998, 15). Joan's dance challenges the hierarchical relationships of dance/writing and mind/body, implicitly suggesting a politically motivating stance.

Randy Martin suggests that the 'presumed gap between a thinking mind and an acting body makes it impossible to understand how people move from a passive to an active state' (1998, 3). Rather than treating politics as an ideology or idea which 'occurs in stillness, awaiting something that will bring people to action or mobilize them', her dance is not simply 'an idea, decision, or choice taken at a moment', but a 'transfigurative process' which might mobilize change and display the importance of action in politics (Martin 1998, 3). Joan choreographs a change in the historically specific rules that guide and make her actions meaningful, rules which are 'redolent with social, political, economic, and aesthetic values' (Foster 1998, 29). Susan Leigh Foster asserts that

> to choreograph a change in these rules is to grapple with the intensely routinized patterns they have produced, but also with the rules themselves, their configuration and dynamism, and the alliances they create with other structurings of power. Such a change may be registered by a single body, but its

choreographic call to action will reflect a theorization of social as well as

individual bodies. (1998, 29)

Joan's final dance, in the context of the text's portrayal of different forms of dance,

invites and incites change. It demonstrates that dance is 'not simply reflective of a

current social reality but can be a gesture towards some other; it is able to project other

possibilities, alluding to a future, to a past, and to another present (Dempster 1995, 24).

Joan's dance contains within it both references to the narratives she had danced to (fairy

tales and romances), a resistance to those narratives and the formation of new patterns.

Her dance 'for herself alone' is brief and unsteady; like the 'ending' of the novel it is

slightly ambiguous but invites readers to join and continue the dance, to rewrite the

cultural choreography as dancers/readers-in-process.

Ambiguous Endings: Steps to the Future

The last chapter of *Lady Oracle*, like Joan's dance, invites readers to participate in

taking new steps rather than presenting them with finalised patterns or providing a

closed, definitive version of the story. Whether Joan will return to Canada to help her

friends avoid the charge of her murder, stay in Italy, or run away is still in question:

'Right now, though, it's easier just to stay here in Rome—I've found a cheap little

pensione—and walk to the hospital for visiting hours' (Atwood 1982, 345). Perhaps

Joan will stay in Rome; on the other hand, there is a possibility that she will return to

Canada to face her responsibilities, secure in the knowledge that she can occupy

multiple and contradictory subject positions and need not hide different aspects of

herself anymore: 'The first thing is to get Sam and Marlene out of jail. [...] I'll feel like

an idiot with all the publicity, but that's nothing new. They'll probably say my

disappearance was some kind of stunt, a trick' (Atwood 1982, 345).

The 'romantic' ending of *Lady Oracle*, similarly, offers to be read in at least two ways. Joan's vigil at the bedside of the journalist in the final chapter of the novel is interpreted by most critics as a disappointing relapse into reliance on yet another idealised hero.[138] I would argue, though, that this episode offers more questions than answers to readers. The image of Joan tending the injured journalist is reminiscent of Mavis Quilp's nurse novels; has she just moved on to a new kind of fantasy? Is she still under the illusion that she has found her dashing Prince Charming? She admits: 'He's a nice man; he doesn't have a very interesting nose, but I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage' (Atwood 1982, 345). The reader may decide that Joan has changed enough by the close of the text not to indulge in romantic fantasies any longer, but the possibility that she has not also prompts readers to ask whether love stories are even possible without such fantasies.

Even if readers decide that Joan may pursue a relationship with the journalist, the text denies them a conventional ending: 'Writing "the end" (a phrase which is precisely both temporal and logical) [...] posits everything that has been written as having been a tension which "naturally" requires resolution, a consequence, an end, i.e., something like a *crisis*' (Barthes 1990, 52). The novel rejects the resolution achieved in the 'happy ending' of romance novels, when the protagonists 'move on to that transcendent domestic plane where they live happily ever after' (Belsey 1994, 39). In doing so, it not only leaves the future open to readers' interpretations, inviting them to write for Joan an 'ending' of their choice, but also sustains the dance of Joan's subjectivity, rather than leaving her and the journalist 'immobilized by their own reciprocal happiness' (Belsey 1994, 39).

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[138] Many critics see the ending of the novel as pessimistic and believe that Joan remains stuck in her role as a victim unable to resist the myths of reliance on heroes perpetuated in gothic-romance novels. Frank Davey (1983) and Barbara Godard (1983), for example, do not recognise the ambivalent nature of the end of the text and conclude that Joan casts herself in the role of nurse to her hero/journalist.

The title of the novel, doubling as the name of both the novel and Joan's poem, is ambiguous; the word 'Lady' with all its connotations of gentility and femininity is juxtaposed with the authority signified by 'Oracle'. George Eliot asserts that 'the most pitiable of all silly novels by lady novelists are what we may call the *oracular* species— novels intended to expound the writer's religious, philosophical, or moral theories' (1990, 148). *Lady Oracle*, conversely, does not moralise or overtly guide readers; rather it leaves its ending open. Joan humorously acts as an oracle in the writing of her poem, 'Lady Oracle', which could be interpreted as a message received from 'the gods', but ultimately 'Lady Oracle' is an appropriate name for her: just like the oracles of ancient texts, Joan's message is ambiguous, yet suggests ways forward. She is a woman who occupies multiple and contradictory subject positions; described by a lover as a goddess, she resists being seen as immortalised in 'statues from whom no words can issue' and instead becomes the one who speaks, the oracular one.[139]

Joan's poem, 'Lady Oracle', is interpreted as a criticism of marriage and, according to her publisher, is perfect for 'the women's movement, the occult, all of that' (Atwood 1982, 226). She tells Arthur the poem is about 'the male-female roles in our society' in order to justify it and to label it as something he would find 'respectable'. It is viewed by many as an angry text, setting up men as the enemy. This parody of *écriture féminine* is written by a process whereby Joan gazes into a mirror, surrounded by candles, waiting for words to appear on the paper in front of her (Atwood 1982, 222, 227). In its presentation of Joan's poem and gothic romance, *Lady Oracle* invites readers to consider that the text is 'more indebted to the "body" of earlier women writers [...] than to any woman writer's libidinal body flow' (Jones 1986, 373). It highlights the gullibility of the public, pointing out that her high-modernist poem attracts just as credulous an audience as her costume gothics do. Set in the 1970s, *Lady*

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[139] Roberta Sciff-Zamaro reads Joan as a Goddess figure, with reference to Robert Graves' 'The White Goddess' (1987). Marilyn Patton, on the other hand, believes that *Lady Oracle* parodies the Goddess figure and suggests that Joan, as a writer, assumes the more positive position of an oracle (1991).

Oracle contains many references to feminism. It echoes seminal texts, such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes*, by emphasising literature's effect on women and highlighting patriarchy's perpetuation of feminine norms in culture. However, it also draws attention to the problems of 'sisterhood' and the idealised unity it promotes, as well as mocking the media's and public's reaction to its ideals. Joan has an ambiguous relationship with institutional feminism, which is figured in terms of a religion one can 'convert to', or a club that can be joined: Marlene, for example, allies herself with the women's movement after Don hits her; having previously dismissed it as 'bourgeois', she suddenly became a 'convert' (Atwood 1982, 248).

Feminism in the text is linked with sisterhood. However, *Lady Oracle* shows that women can be as harmful as men and does not figure them in superior terms. Although Joan's Aunt Lou and her Brownies Guide are presented as positive role models for her, many of the women Joan has encountered in her life have made her miserable. Marlene is not exactly a 'sister' in feminism, nor were Miss Flegg, her mother, or the girls she went to school and Brownies with. Similarly, the men in the text have double or multiple aspects to their characters; they do not seem to have any virtues, but are not set up as the 'enemy' either. The text is not about binary oppositions, but the acknowledgment of difference; any 'Battle of the Sexes' is shown to perpetuate harmful binary oppositions that are unhelpful to feminism.

Feminism as a metanarrative based on emancipation can be compared to Arthur's Marxist politics. Joan's inability to properly engage with Marxism may invite the reader to notice that such political metanarratives are restrictive and ultimately cannot be adhered to. Even Arthur cannot stick consistently to it, no matter how hard he tries: he constantly changes affiliation and theorists. Joan tells Paul that Arthur is not exactly a Communist: 'It's hard to explain, but it's different here. Besides, it doesn't

mean anything here, it's respectable, sort of. They don't *do* anything; they just have

meetings and talk a lot' (Atwood 1982, 280). The assertion that Arthur's membership of

a political group 'doesn't mean anything' may prompt readers to prevent feminism from

taking the same direction. Any political group, including feminism, must constantly

question its ideals if it wants to practise politics effectively. Even the notion of 'joining'

a political group, as Marlene does, is called into question. Once a person becomes

committed to emancipatory projects labelled 'Marxism' or 'Feminism', the work carried

out for those political groups necessitates becoming part of the system. An alternative

might be what Jacques Derrida terms 'the law of abounding, of *excess*, the law of

participation without membership' (1980, 63). Participation without belonging means

that one can take part in politics without being included, without being contained within

it. One can take part in ideologies without toeing the party line, thereby reserving the

right to disagree. *Lady Oracle*'s Joan demonstrates an ideological allegiance to

feminism without being a 'member'. The motif of caterpillars and butterflies in *Lady*

Oracle signify her optimism that one day she, like feminism, may turn into a butterfly.

Meanwhile both remain in a positive state of metamorphosis, always questioning their

own politics and constantly changing.

Writing is a form of resistance precisely because it does not necessitate

affiliation with a political group. Joan's writing questions what has gone before,

including the ideology of femininity promoted in gothic romances and their

perpetuation in contemporary society. She learns from the past to look to the future, and

takes a step to dance in a different direction. The suggestion at the end of the text that

Joan will write science fiction in future, instead of costume gothics, offers the reader

exciting possibilities: science fiction's futuristic stance allows it to interrogate

naturalised, negative discourses and to suggest new options for readers. It can bring

about change by contrasting imagined worlds with the contemporary one and can avoid

the totalitarian impulses of other texts by suggesting different futures. In fact, the ending

of *Lady Oracle* is similar to many science fiction texts; it does not set out a blueprint for

the future, but suggest options for the reader to consider. The last sentence of the text

signifies a self-conscious refusal to close off the work: 'It did make a mess; but then, I

don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person' (Atwood 1982, 345).

Just as *Lady Oracle* denies the reader final closure and fixed decisions, so too

should feminism question all forms of authority, even within its own ranks. According

to deconstruction, 'a decision that was determined by prior theories or reasons would

not be a decision, but the simple administration of a program, so for a decision to be

worthy of its name it must supervene in a situation of undecidability, where the decision

is not given, but must be taken' (Bennington 2001, 200). As the text resists stable

signification and a single meaning, feminism might pluralise into *feminisms*. Feminisms

might become engaged in an endless process, never claiming to have a monolithic

strategy, which closes off the alterity that makes politics possible in the first place. By

embracing a 'proliferation of meaning', instead of fearing it, multiple modes of

feminism can be formed, monolithic strategies avoided, and a better future envisioned.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan comes to terms with the past in order to look to the future.

In some respects, the text reads like the free associations of an analysand, offering the

reader the position of the analyst. Joan's narrative contains many ellipsis marks,

indicating slips and omissions and gaps to signify the repressed, and the process of

narrating can be interpreted as an attempt to recognise this. The narrative provides a

space for the prevention of the return of the 're-'. In 'Rewriting Modernity', Lyotard

conceives a modal take on the postmodern as something that does not come before or

after anything. He does not scrap the historicity of postmodernity, but rather strips it of

chronological, linear time. Postmodernity *rewrites modernity* because of the advantages

the 're-' provides instead of the 'post-'. Lyotard urges that 're-', taken in the sense of a

return, can mean a return to a starting point, it signifies 'starting the clock again from zero, wiping the slate clean, the gesture which inaugurates in one go the beginning of the new age and the new periodization' (1991, 26). A second and different sense of the 're-', however, 'in no way signifies a return to the beginning but rather what Freud called a "working through", *Durcharbeitung*' (Lyotard 1991, 26). This is not to be understood as a will to remember or as a deliberate, conscious act:

> If we understand 'rewriting modernity' in this way, like seeking out, designating and naming the hidden facts that one imagines to be the source of the ills that ail one, i.e. as a simple process of remembering, one cannot fail to perpetuate the crime, and perpetrate it anew instead of putting an end to it. (Lyotard 1991, 28)

In remembering, the subject tries to master history: 'One wants to get hold of the past, grasp what has gone away, master, exhibit the initial crime', in order to find a first cause (Lyotard 1991, 29). In *Durcharbeitung*, however, there is no willed search for origins and no striving towards an end: 'Contrary to remembering, working through would be defined as a work without end and therefore without will: without end in the sense in which it is not guided by the concept of an end—but not without finality' (Lyotard 1991, 30).

In some senses, the form of Joan's narrative is indicative of this process of working through. According to Lyotard, 'in working through, [...] a fragment of a sentence, a scrap of information, a word, come along. They are immediately linked with another "unit"' (1991, 31). Until she reaches a certain point—the maze or labyrinth; in psychological terms, a descent into the unconscious—she consistently tries to set the clock back, to make 'new' lives for herself and to create new pasts. By the end of the text the reader is offered the possibility that Joan has 'worked through' and will not make the same mistakes over and over. In her narrative she did not simply remember, a process in which the past inevitably returns to haunt; rather she 'worked through' the

past by association. Not only does Joan look back at her own life in order to move forward, but the text, too, examines the matrix of feminism and past literature to consider the next steps to be taken, or even danced. As in *The Dancers Dancing* and *Sexing the Cherry*, the retelling of past fictions blends past and present in such a way as to question what lies in the future, providing a space for the reader to form new attitudes.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have argued that, whilst dance can imply obedience to rules, where it means following set steps, a male partner, or a cultural choreography, it can also provide a space for resisting convention and reconfiguring old patterns. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora's dance combines both; she begs her husband to instruct and lead her in dancing the Tarantella, yet almost immediately begins to transgress the space allotted to her, testing propriety and literally moving beyond what is considered acceptable. She risks stirring herself into different spaces and stepping outside the rules of dance and 'feminine' behaviour. Nora is not destined to perpetually reproduce the confining meanings and values attached to femininity in her cultural moment; her dance testifies to the subject's ability to move between the knowledges inscribed in culture. Meanings are unstable; the signifier means only in relation to other signifiers and exists in a system in which there are only differences. Nora, like the texts and the dancing women investigated in this thesis, is able to move between meanings, 'bringing one to bear on another as alternative or critique, and to constitute in the process new knowledges, new understandings, thus modifying for other subjects the range of what it is possible to know, to think, or to say' (Belsey 1994, 199).

The dancing texts explored in this thesis self-consciously alert readers to the role language plays in constructing subjects; staging resistant choreographies by rewriting canonical texts, they invite readers to consider how steps to the future might be taken. Discontent with social arrangements produces dances and texts that challenge the status quo; traditional texts, conventional representations of dance, and their meanings are denaturalized, re-scripted, and new steps are choreographed. Certain dances produce hopes and aspirations for a more nuanced way of being and signify unstable, multifarious subjectivity. Western metaphysical logic's desire for fixity and patriarchy's

determination to maintain things as they are, are literally challenged in dance; it

mobilizes new configurations of bodies and thoughts and exposes the contradictions,

inconsistencies and limits in a logic that sets itself up as stable. The dancing text,

likewise, subverts fixity, order and unity, showing that meaning is multiple and cannot

be stabilized; the dance of various intertexts in the three novels dealt with here, and their

refusal to wrap up loose ends, invite readers to occupy positions of uncertainty.

Interpellated by texts which throw into relief the illusory status of liberal humanist

subjectivity and denied positions of knowingness, readers are implicitly invited to

choreograph new textual and social patterns. Dance is fluid and opens up new spaces

where cohesion and authority are undermined, questions posed.

Dance never signifies in a straightforward fashion; its performance calls on

various movements and texts. Some dances appear to be ideologically explicit, whilst

others are not easily interpreted and require readers to work at making their meanings.

Orla dances with others; Joan dances alone; Fortunata teaches pupils how to dance:

these dances are all different, but each one offers spaces where norms are challenged

and new ways of being enacted. Their very difference testifies to the instability of dance

as a signifying system. The dancing texts investigated in this thesis challenge the logic

which keeps things apart and categorises them in binary oppositions, showing that

borders and boundaries can be transgressed, that meaning is differential and deferred.

The texts break down boundaries between bodies and thoughts, canonical and non-

canonical texts, masculine and feminine, 'nature' and culture, and ultimately offer

readers spaces in which boundaries between the sexes might be challenged. In these

spaces, difference would not be figured in a binary opposition, but would be

innumerable; in the dance, a 'general deformation of logic' might be enacted, in which

sexual difference would be empty of metaphysical duality, male and female voices

would be pluralized, and a dream of the innumerable enacted (Derrida 1988, 175).

Dances conducted by characters in the texts explored here are read in light of the formal, metaphoric, textual and intertextual interweaving that makes these novels both feminist and postmodern. As the close readings in the preceding chapters suggest, dance offers a space in which new possibilities are envisioned, just as the postmodern thematic and formal aspects of the texts jubilantly step beyond what has gone before; they break rules in order to challenge totalitarian literary and political forms. In this way, my readings of the novels and my concern with dancing is politically motivated; it gestures towards a feminist politics that might constantly question itself, never resting on one principle or toeing a party line. Dance, in one of many interpretations, has been thought to signify frivolous, leisurely behaviour and has been seen as an activity that should take place in an arena separate from 'serious' contexts. Dance can involve discipline, strict training, extreme bodily configurations, pain and confinement; it can also signify joyous release from restrictions, inventiveness and non-conformity; indeed, some dances can embody both. Emma Goldman's determination to dance challenges the traditional distinction between dancing as a feminised, trivial activity and politics as masculine and serious. Dance lies at the point 'at which reflection and embodiment meet, at which doing and anticipation are intertwined'; it stages an engagement with cultural scripts and an active, rather than static politics (Martin 1998, 1). Dancing can be pleasurable, and can also perform serious challenges: the texts investigated here are festive and comedic, but also soberly confront and resist patriarchal ideology, even if that very ideology is perpetuated by women, like *The Dancers Dancing*'s Elizabeth, or *Lady Oracle*'s Miss Flegg. Dancing, reading and writing can be fun, where fun, according to Meaghan Morris, can incorporate 'enthusiasm, amusement, admiration, a sense of a challenge to learn, but also concern, irritation, anxiety or bemusement, a desire to confront something bothersome' (1988, 7).

The 'bothersome' unity and coherence that Western logic strives to impose is rebutted in my discussions of the mutability of the body, subjectivity and textuality. The incorporation of various discourses in the novels themselves refutes the notion of coherence and closure; no text can exist as a closed system, as there are traces of all other texts and discourses in each text. Like *Sexing the Cherry*'s princesses, the texts dance and do not rest on one style or discourse; critics, like readers, can accept or reject various knowledges, various readings. Consequently, then, my reading of dancing women and texts is just one of many and might be departed from or added to. My interpretation of each text is 'not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it' (Barthes 1990, 5). Accordingly, these dancing texts, and indeed, the dance, can be read and re-read to discover new meanings. The three novels dance both thematically and formally, but in different ways: brought together in this thesis, they consist of an 'assemblage', of a 'bringing together', which 'has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again, as well as being ready to bind others together' (Derrida 1973, 132). My thesis is suggestive rather than exhaustive; the novels I examine are employed to provide examples for the potential of postmodern feminist novels to incite changes in social configurations. Many more examples might be dealt with in both similar and different ways, and the same examples might be read differently.

This thesis has dealt with Western novels and focussed on Western readers, but different feminisms might read the three novels in entirely different ways. Feminism, like the texts dealt with here, is a plural 'tapestry composed of threads of many different hues' and, as such, strives to address all aspects of women's lives (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 35). My approach is merely one, just as 'woman' is just one subject position among many; heterogeneous feminist approaches are more favourable than a single

methodology in addressing such multifarious topics as women and intertextuality. Like

the dance, 'feminist criticism is situated within the exchange that constitutes it, within

the differences which divide it from any self or essence, any unified position' (Jacobus

1986, 292). Feminisms, like the readers of the three novels dealt with here, might

discover the jubilant dance that comes from breaking and inventing new rules, instead

of marching in step to a unified politics in a militant manner. If feminists continue to be

heterogeneous, producing criticism that never rests, and work in conjunction with

writers who produce texts which 'demystify [...] the *community* of language as a

universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes', we can avoid ignoring

topics which are relevant to women (Kristeva 1981b, 35). Literature and criticism might

continue to be produced, which not only confront received ideas, but also challenge

readers, encouraging them to rethink accepted norms and invent new movements.

A step to be taken from this thesis might be to investigate differences between

representations of dancing men and women, or to provide a more detailed view of what

dance traditionally signifies in patriarchal texts. There is also room for a more sustained

account of the relationships between dance, gender, race and class; women are not

homogeneous and the differences between them need to be accounted for. Race, for

instance, has not been explicitly dealt with in this thesis, not because 'whiteness' is seen

as a non-race, but because I believe the topic requires and merits more attention than it

was possible to give it here. An investigation of race, gender and dance would not

necessarily only have to engage with texts which obviously use racial interrogation as

their subject matter; it could be carried out in relation to *The Dancers Dancing, Sexing

the Cherry* and *Lady Oracle*. For too long, whiteness has been given normative status

and seen as an unmarked category; in these Western texts, images of whiteness can be

read, implicitly avoiding only seeing whiteness as a racial category when it is

juxtaposed with non-whiteness. Either way, there is always 'something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery' (Dyer 1997, 1).

In keeping with the nature of the texts at hand, I wish to maintain an open-ended approach. Experience is re-perceived in these novels; the dominant culture's energy and effort to present what is cultural as natural is usurped in them and transformed into a dancing energy which disputes these mythologies. This dancing energy pervades the texts' resistance of unnecessary closure and their transgressions of generic and disciplinary boundaries. Throughout this thesis I have argued that texts which provide readers with answers, where events reach their 'natural' conclusion and all narrative threads are gathered together, are ultimately totalitarian. Texts which conclude in conventional ways present readers with final decisions and results, immobilizing them in the process, preventing them from dancing. To conclude is to finish, sum up, or to settle an argument, ending the debate at hand; closure presents an end to progress and is thus inappropriate to feminist thought. My unwillingness, and the dancing novels' refusal, to close off the issues, marks a hope for continued change and an ongoing resistance against confinement and set patterns. 'Conclusion' in this thesis, like the novels it investigates, does not draw a final line, but is an 'arbitrary and temporary gesture [...] in the continuing exchange—the movement—of feminist literary criticism' (Jacobus 1986, 292).

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