DAMES OF DISTRESS:
FEMALE VIOLENCE AND REVISED SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSES IN THE FICTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD

by

Kiley Kapuscinski

A thesis submitted to the Department of English
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(July, 2008)

Copyright ©Kiley Kapuscinski, 2008
Abstract

This study examines the figure of the violent woman in Atwood’s fiction as a productive starting point for the re-evaluation of various socio-cultural debates. Emerging from Atwood’s conviction that art, in its various forms, is often involved in the re-writing of convention, I begin by re-defining traditional constructions of womanhood and violence in order to evince the reformatory work and often unconventional forms of brutality employed by women in Atwood’s novels, including *Surfacing*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Lady Oracle*, and *Cat’s Eye*, and in her collections of short fiction, such as *Dancing Girls*, *Bluebeard’s Egg*, *The Penelopiad*, and *The Tent*. Throughout, I demonstrate the ambivalence of violence as both destructive and generative, Canadian and un-Canadian, and Atwood’s drawing on this destabilizing ambivalence in order to propose change within her broader social milieu. More precisely, the introductory chapter offers an overview of representations of female violence in Canadian fiction, and of the various responses to this figure as she appears in Atwood’s fiction, that point to the need for a critical vocabulary that addresses women’s capacity to enact harm. The second chapter examines the various mythologies that define Canada and its people, and how the violent woman troubles these mythologies by inciting recognition of national identity as a narrative process open to re-evaluation. The third chapter moves away from this focus on national narratives to highlight the discourses that similarly shape our understanding of art, and those who participate in it. Here, the violent woman can be seen to engage in revisionary work by exposing the limits of the Red Shoes Syndrome that has in many ways come to define the fraught relationship between the female artist and her art. The final chapter examines Atwood’s on-going fascination with various kinds of mythologies.
and her revisions of Classical and Biblical myths in order to highlight the veritable range of female violence and the possibility, and at times necessity, of responding to these behaviors in ways that circumnavigate traditionally masculine forms of justice ethics. In focusing on how Atwood’s violent women engage these various socio-cultural discourses, this study concludes that traditionally marginal and nonliterary figures can perform central and necessary roles and that Atwood’s fiction responds to, and in turn (re)creates, the social environment from which it emerges.
Acknowledgements

A major project like this is never done alone, and my endless gratitude goes out to all of those who inspired and guided me along the way. My greatest thanks are extended to Tracy Ware, whose encouragement and support have been extraordinary, and to Glenn Willmott and Shannon Hengen for their thorough and insightful suggestions. A special thank you also to my wonderful partner Mark Yourkevich and to my mother, both of whom have always been proud of and excited about anything I do, and to my father, who was always there in spirit. I am also grateful to Elisabeth Oliver, who offered sanity, perspective, and many craft nights to help me work out the knots.
# Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements.....................................................................................................................iv
Table of Contents.......................................................................................................................... v
Chapter 1: “Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone?”.................................................................1
Chapter 2: Negotiating the Nation................................................................................................. 50
Chapter 3: Exis-tensions.............................................................................................................. 107
Chapter 4: Writing the Wrong...................................................................................................... 165
Chapter 5: “exploring the shadow side”.................................................................................... 218
Works Cited................................................................................................................................... 229
Chapter 1

“Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone?”: The En-gendering of Violence

… I will enter a simple plea; women, both as characters and as people, must be allowed their imperfections.

(Atwood “The Curse of Eve” 227)

Reflecting upon her first novel, *Up in the Air So Blue*, written at age twenty-three, Margaret Atwood recalls the centrality of violence to the unpublished narrative that concludes on a grim note “with the female protagonist wondering whether or not to push one of the male characters off a roof” (“Where Is How” 9). The rendering offered here of the violent woman with the dangerous potential and willingness to respond to her aggressive impulses is one that Atwood develops throughout her fiction. Venturing to disrupt the enduring myth of Canada as a peaceable kingdom first articulated in the 1867 constitutional call for the definitively Canadian principles of “peace, order and good government,” and the traditional roles of women as exclusively victims and witnesses of violence, Atwood’s fiction offers images of female violence that boldly challenge conventional representations of women in Canadian literature, and that destabilize lingering historical tendencies to equate passivity and morality with the female gender. Not surprisingly, Atwood’s various representations of violent women have left many readers and critics unsettled,¹ to the extent that when Atwood poses the question, “Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone?” (“Margaret Atwood’s Address”), the answer is not only self-evident in the context of Atwood’s corpus, but evocative of distressing images of female brutality that Atwood critics have hitherto failed to interpret within a fully-developed or nuanced critical frame. Endeavoring to speak the seemingly unspeakable,
the purpose of this study is to examine Atwood’s critically neglected fascination with the figure of the violent woman in her novels, short stories, and mini-fictions and her construction of this female figure as a destabilizing entity within the context of various social and cultural debates. Beginning with an effort to contextualize Atwood’s representations of violent women within her more widely ranging interest in violence and the aggregate of other Canadian writers grappling with the very real potential of women to do harm, this discussion frames its broader study of female brutality in Atwood’s fiction by addressing the dispersed work of Atwoodian scholars who have only begun to offer Atwood’s violent women the critical and theoretical attention they warrant, and the more general dearth of critical frames within which to examine female brutality.

Moreover, despite the diffuse attempts of critics to acknowledge the presence of violent women in Atwood’s fiction, such scholarly evaluations remain sparse and often misleading, thus preventing this leitmotiv from achieving the critical mass necessary to allow aggressive women to emerge on their own terms.

While acknowledging that any examination of a thematic figure in literature will necessarily be an incomplete and ongoing one, this study nonetheless posits that an understanding of Atwood’s representations of violent women is essential to address the broader issues of how Atwood imagines women’s place in literature, and the relationship between literature and its social context. Emerging from Atwood’s conviction that art, in its various forms, is often engaged in the re-writing of conventions, and thus that new ways of thinking proposed by creative works should be anticipated and celebrated, rather than resisted, this discussion re-define traditional constructions of womanhood and violence in order to evince the communicative intent and often unconventional forms of
brutality employed by women in Atwood’s novels, such as *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *The Penelopiad*, and in her short fiction, including works from *Dancing Girls*, *Bluebeard’s Egg*, *Wilderness Tips*, and *The Tent*. The exclusion of Atwood’s poetry from this discussion, despite its frequent examination of human brutality and violation, is intended not only to focus the scope of this study and to draw attention to Atwood’s critically neglected short fiction, but also to reflect Atwood’s sense of poetry as a supersaturated form and “a condensing lens” (“Uncollected Prose [A]”) that distils its surroundings, and of prose as offering a broader vision that ambitiously attempts to account for “all of the cultural milieu” (“Evading” 137). More aptly, the latter form enables Atwood to more adequately address the revision of social narratives and to provide a more extensive depiction of individuals interacting with their continually changing social environment. Atwood’s interest in the intersections between the creative act and engagement with one’s broader socio-cultural milieu, confirmed early in her career through her “axiomatic” assertion that “art has its roots in social realities” (“A Question” 53), has been repeatedly demonstrated by the manner in which her fictional representations of female violence contribute to, and consistently challenge, the discourses of feminism, nationalism, female artistry, and ethics. While violence is typically experienced by both the victimizer and the victim as an intensely personal event, focusing exclusively on this intimacy in Atwood’s fiction limits one’s ability to see the broader social resonances created by the violent act. Alternatively, by exploring how Atwood’s violent women engage various socio-cultural topics, one is enabled to see how Atwood’s fiction responds to, and in turn (re)creates, the social environment from which it emerges.
Few Canadian writers have engaged as extensively or as successfully as Atwood in social, cultural, and political issues, and perhaps even fewer have addressed the topic of human violence that Atwood repeatedly forces her readers to contend with. Beyond her assertion that “Witness is what you must bear” (“Notes”, *True 69*), which many critics have formulated as her literary byword, Atwood emphasizes the importance of openly discussing violence, rather than denying or evading its existence, in maintaining that “The most important field of study at the moment is … the study of human aggression” (“Canadian-American” 391). The range of violent acts that Atwood’s fiction brings to light, including, but not limited to, self-directed violence (*Lady Oracle, Cat’s Eye, The Blind Assassin*),


5 reveals how Atwood’s focus on female brutality expands upon and continues her dedication to recognizing violence in all its manifestations and to seeing her surroundings as they are, rather than how they ideally should be. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas’s notice of the “peculiarly visual, material quality” (687) of Atwood’s writing in general further intimates that her writerly aesthetic reinforces, and ensures the enduring impact of, the central motifs in her work. Atwood’s recognition of reality’s hard truths, and the regrettable, but nonetheless inescapable, existence of brutality indicates how, for Atwood, violence and aggression are not inhuman acts of monstrosity, but deeply *human* behaviors reminding us of the inexorable fact that “Life contains awful things” (“Margaret Atwood’s Address”).

6 In a moment of liberality common during her interviews, Atwood points out the stark reality and humanity informing her fictional
depictions of violence: “When I write about [violence], I try not to make anything up. What some human beings have done to one another needs no embroidery, it’s all just horrific the way it is” (my emphasis “Margaret Atwood” 198). Performing as thematic refrains in her fiction, images of violence and brutality both allow Atwood to examine humanity at depths that she could otherwise not plumb, and force her readers to acknowledge that violence is not a disembodied construct, but a definitively human and thoroughly embodied reality. As her speaker in “The Loneliness of the Military Historian” explains, “Despite the propaganda, there are no monsters” (Morning 51).

Responding to the distinctively human face that Atwood gives to violence, the goal of this study is not to condone or absolve acts of female brutality, but rather, to address how violence is an ineffaceable part of humanity, and to recognize how female violence is implicated in, and comments on, broader social, cultural and political issues. In critiquing their environments, violent women in Atwood’s fiction are not predeterminately bound to act in harmful ways, given Atwood’s belief in free will and the fact that many women in her fiction are able to resist their impulses towards harm. Yet this does not lessen the extent to which all women are capable of inflicting grievous and often permanent damage. This study emphasizes the importance of learning to read and interpret female violence, rather than flatly dismissing its existence or relevance, and stems from the belief that it is only in recognizing the often unexpected forms of women’s brutality, and moving beyond the cognitive dissonance produced by the phrase “violent woman,” that we can begin to understand this figure, and the central role she plays in Atwood’s writing.
Yet Atwood is not the first to recognize and humanize women’s violence through her fiction, nor will she be the last. Contextualizing Atwood within a heritage of Canadian writers who have similarly acknowledged the value of depicting violent women prevents the critical error of viewing Atwood’s representations of female brutality as literary anomalies. Likewise, the refusal to view Atwood’s violent women as isolated literary events challenges the pervasive cultural myth that female brutality is a rare aberration in, and an unlikely divergence from, an otherwise homogenous and predictable female nature. Taken together, the assemblage of Canadian writers exploring female violence testifies to the veritable range of women’s behaviors, and further suggests the various motives inciting women in Canada to engage in acts of harm.

The representation of women’s violence as a rejoinder to, and refusal of, patriarchal oppression has been the most extensively employed approach to female brutality in Canadian fiction, and Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* (1925) is a landmark depiction of how a woman’s decision to harm another stems from the severe restrictions forced upon her. A primarily realist novel with aspects of the Gothic and regional romance, *Wild Geese* narrates the lives of the Gare family as they struggle to survive both the isolation of life on the Manitoba prairies and the constrictions placed upon them by the power-hungry patriarch and head of their household, Caleb Gare. While Caleb’s eldest daughter Ellen and his wife Amelia acquiesce to Caleb’s ceaseless desire to control both his farmstead and his family, seventeen year-old Judith Gare resists her father’s tyranny and effectively combats the suffocating environment that he creates. Anticipating Ann Tracy’s *Winter Hunger* (1990), in which Diana’s cannibalizing of her infant son Cam and murder of her husband Alan partially stems from Alan’s selfish desire to “bind
[Diana] to him forever” (164), and partially from her possession by the Wendigo spirit, *Wild Geese* depicts Judith’s will to destroy as concomitant with her will to defy. Judith’s introduction in the novel, effected through the image of her “great, defiant body” and her recalcitrant stance, “as if prepared to take or give a blow” (11), offers an early presentiment of Judith’s potential for violence that eventually manifests in numerous ways. Following an argument with Caleb in which he again attempts to regulate her relationships and to physically punish her for her romantic trysts, Judith grabs the handle of a nearby axe and throws it “with all her strength at Caleb’s head” (166); later reflecting on the event, Judith recalls how her transgression was committed “with the intent to kill” (188). Judith’s proclivity towards violence, elsewhere seen in her explicitly violent, yet strangely intimate, behavior towards her lover Sven (85-6) and in her efforts to “smash [Ellen’s] face” (188), suggests how her use of violence to repudiate patriarchal dominance has extended into her more benign relationships and has led her to partake in not human, but animalistic, tendencies and the “world of true instincts” (224) symbolized by the wild birds of the novel’s title.

Further examples of women’s use of violence to escape the brutal violations and restrictions men have forced upon them include Ray Smith’s *Lord Nelson Tavern* (1974) and Anne Cameron’s *The Journey* (1982). Yet other Canadian writers addressing female violence have attempted to focus more singularly on women’s often unacknowledged capacity to enact violence upon other women. Works such as William Kirby’s *The Golden Dog* (1877), Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* (2000), and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *The Way the Crow Flies* (2003) explore the enduring harm resultant from women’s often unmentionable acts of violence against members of their own sex, where
such acts are frequently portrayed as variations on the theme of women’s violent self-hatred more fully articulated in novels such as Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Ying Chen’s *Ingratitude* (1998), and Hélène Monette’s *Unless* (1995). While examinations of female violence as a means to retribute men or to brutalize the female body underscore the dangerousness of women’s violent potential and render it a topic of serious literary consideration, not all representations of the violent woman in Canadian fiction have lent her harmful behaviors such gravity. Notwithstanding the tradition of writers who have insisted upon the profundity and complexity of women’s violence, writers such as Jack Hodgins, in *The Invention of the World* (1977), and John Mills, in *Skevington’s Daughter* (1978), have looked satirically at female violence and cast women’s brutality as a parody of real violence, indicating the lingering reluctance of Canadian writers to recognize the seriousness of female aggression and its potential to result in lasting harm.

Given the substantial body of Canadian writers examining women’s violence in various manifestations, it is surprising how few critical attempts have been made to examine female brutality within the Canadian context. Yet the absence of a clear definition of “violence” in the Canadian Criminal Code, and the use of the masculine pronoun “he” to define acts of assault in the most recent version of the document, mark how there are social and legal factors enabling and encouraging this critical oversight. While John Moss’s early study of *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (1977) examines the issue of violence in Canadian fiction and the manner in which literary depictions of violence demand ethical responses, his analysis forcefully yokes brutality to sexuality and fails to offer a sustained examination of female violence and the ways in
which it dramatically redefines the traditionally masculine construct of aggression.

Similarly, the essays contained in the 1982 anthology *Violence in the Canadian Novel Since 1960*, while at times encouraging new ways of thinking about harm, frequently fall back upon masculine paradigms of violence, or evade the issue of interpersonal brutality by addressing the violence enacted in the violation and manipulation of literary forms.

More recently, Paula Ruth Gilbert’s *Violence and the Female Imagination* (2006) has convincingly demonstrated the importance of a tradition of women writers in Quebec who are exploring the intersections among sex, gender and violence, yet Gilbert’s analysis is deeply rooted in Quebec’s history and political ethos, and as such, neglects to examine the broader social themes raised in depictions of female brutality.

Within the specific context of Atwoodian scholarship, relatively greater recognition has been given to women’s capacity to do harm. Beyond the traditional evaluations of Atwood that focus on her environmentalism, revisionism, humanitarianism, feminism and nationalism, critical examinations of violent women have been emerging rhizomatically in Atwood discourses and attempting to provide women with a nuanced place within both Canadian literature and discourses of violence. From Sherrill Grace’s *Violent Duality* (1980), in which she draws attention to how, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan “is cruelly treated and, in turn, causally if not vindictively, abuses others” (127), to J. Brooks Bouson’s *Brutal Choreographies* (1993), which highlights the necessity of recognizing the codes of antagonism inherent in Atwood’s fiction and women’s participation in them, to Mary Kirtz’s recent essay, in which she notes how, in *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine’s “monstrous behaviors” are “all too human” (70), Atwood critics are increasingly extending the frames within which violence is recognized, and arriving at a
realization that Atwood herself has long known: that “Evil women are necessary in story traditions” (“Spotty-Handed” 172).

Over the past three decades, there have emerged several thematic centers around which critical discussions of Atwood’s violent women have tended to convene. The most prevalent of these is the tendency to view female violence as reflective of Atwood’s interest in Gothicism. Frank Davey was among the first to note how Joan’s self-defensive assault in Lady Oracle of a young reporter with a Cinzano bottle (after mistaking him for an intruder) signals both her enactment of the stereotypical struggle of the Gothic heroine with an ominous stranger and her decision to “re-enter the Gothic script” (Margaret Atwood 60). Susan Jaret McKinstry similarly observes the Gothic conventions underwriting female violence in Lady Oracle and further asserts Joan’s identity as simultaneously that of the victim and the victimizer. Commenting on how, early in the novel, Joan’s obese childhood self is figuratively killed by Joan’s adult self in her efforts to revise her history and to forget her past, McKinstry argues that Joan’s “disguised, murdered past return[s], in appropriate Gothic fashion, to haunt her” (63), and that Joan’s murder of her childhood identity is coterminous with a defensive burial of her former self that aims to both obscure and preserve her past, rather than destroy it outright. Illuminating the ways in which Joan’s actions have become integrated into, and mimetic of, the Gothic fictions she creates, McKinstry’s analysis of Joan’s imaginative murder additionally reveals how the violent woman in Atwood’s fiction is a flexible and itinerant figure whose violence is often enacted in non-physical ways, and with intentions other than a desire to do harm. More recently, Coral Ann Howells has offered a re-evaluation of The Edible Woman in light of the growing awareness of Gothic codes in Atwood’s
writing. Offering a further interpretation of one of Atwood’s earliest and most debated images, Howells examines the anthropomorphic cake Marian creates and suggests that her severing of the cake figure’s head is a “violent gesture with its parody of vampire-slaying” that connotes how “the feminine image has been draining Marian’s life blood but will have the power to do so no more” (Margaret Atwood 33-34). Howells’s analysis of female brutality and its empowering, if not redemptive, possibilities suggests Atwood’s revision of both violence discourses and traditional Gothic conventions in which women are frequently saved, but rarely savage.

 Yet Marian’s multivalent cake is of further relevance to this discussion to the extent that it embodies one of the earliest representations of doubling and duplicity that have since become characteristic of Atwood’s fiction. In addition to analyses foregrounding Atwood’s use of Gothic conventions, a second critical trend is the linking of the violent women to the image of the doppelgänger. While the uncanny double is widely regarded as a central element of the Gothic, and is for some definitive of Gothicism itself, the pervasiveness of critical attempts to link the violent woman with images of duplicity warrants a separate analysis of the violent woman as uncanny Other. Grace’s early examination of how “Duplicity … is a touchstone in [Atwood’s] art” (3) in many ways establishes a critical climate for later critics such as Annis Pratt to articulate how, for example in Surfacing, the narrator is cognizant of her capacity to harm and is “constantly aware of her brother as the technologically violent, murderer-side of her own personality” (144). In her analysis of Cat’s Eye, Howells similarly notes the “threatening games of death and burial” (“Transgressing” 146) cruelly initiated by Cordelia and her existence as Elaine’s “tormentor and her own dark double” (“Transgressing” 145), an
observation echoed and extended by Nathalie Cooke, who urges us to recognize the “disturbing” fact that we, as readers, can all “recognize some aspect of Cordelia in our own childhood selves” (Biography 299). Numerous other critics, such as Barbara Hill Rigney, who notes that Joan’s violent mother in Lady Oracle is Joan’s “double, a reflected version of herself” (65), and Ann Heilmann, who resolves that Zenia in The Robber Bride is “the embodiment of all that is repressed in society and the self” (175), confirm how Atwood’s concern with unsettled bodily boundaries extends to her representations of the violent female as uncanny Other. For many Atwood critics, the violent woman is deeply disturbing not only because of her threatening presence and brutal actions, but because of her inescapable familiarity.

A third way in which critics have read Atwood’s violent woman is to view her behaviors as an appropriation of masculine culture and conduct. Unlike critical attempts to see the violent woman as an uncanny psychic fragment, and thus as an integral, albeit unacknowledged, aspect of the female self, attempts to understand female brutality as an unauthorized borrowing of male behaviors sever women’s ties to violence and suggest that female violence always entails the violent woman acting as man and miming elements of his masculinity. For example, Davey, in his early reading of Life Before Man, finds Elizabeth emblematic of the “most ‘male’” force in the novel because her “chief delight is ‘control’” and because her vehement words strike Chris (the “female force” in the novel) “like a solid meeting a liquid, like a gunshot meeting flesh” (Margaret 90). Explicitly aligning the masculine with authority, solidity and weaponry, and the feminine with passivity, fluidity, and flesh, Davey’s analysis hinges on an understanding of violence as gender coded, and as a definitively male activity.
Complicating Davey’s early observations, Cooke’s more recent analysis of Alias Grace indicates how Atwood returns to questions concerning the en-gendering of violence in her portrayal of the convicted murderess Grace Marks and her ultimately indeterminate identity as victim, villain, or both. Specifically, Cooke notes how male characters “strive to prove Grace’s innocence” while “their female counterparts are generally more suspicious” (Biography 325), suggesting that men, defensively holding violence as definitive of male selfhood, are reluctant to imagine women’s participation in brutality, while women, who know the true range of women’s capabilities, find Grace’s suspected transgressions less difficult to fathom. Yet Cooke, like Davey, fails to dispute the cultural sense of women as foreigners to violence, or to suggest how masculine codes of aggression are grossly inadequate within discussions of female violence, both of which are germane to understanding Atwood’s literary treatment of violent women.

The fourth, and by far most sensationalist, approach has been the effort to align Atwood’s violent women with Atwood herself. The autobiographical fallacy underlying this approach has allowed critics and interviewers to imagine Atwood’s fiction as a roman à clef that provides a window into the often elusive and extensively-sought Atwood persona. Notwithstanding Atwood’s frequent insistence that her writing is not a portal into her personal life and her at times ironic amusement with critics’ attempts to match her to her literary creations, interviewers such as Val Ross, in her discussion with Atwood about The Robber Bride, attempt to tantalize readers by both dismissing the notion that a “kinder, gentler Atwood” is offered in the novel and pointing to Atwood’s likeness to Zenia, describing how, when Atwood smiles, she exposes “delicate, sharp little teeth.” The erroneous and presumptuous congruities often drawn between Atwood
and her characters are encouraged by the opinions of literary critics such as George Woodcock who, following his discussion of Atwood, insists that “nothing an author produces … comes from anywhere but within, and thus there must be one among [her] personae—even if not the everyday one—whose life is in fact being written in [her] novels” (“Bashful” 231). In an effort to correct her critic’s autobiographical assumptions, Atwood returns to images of the uncanny Other in her interview with Eleanor Wachtel and suggests how the recognition of the author in her fiction is a false perception that covers up the fact that readers are “really recogniz[ing] themselves” (“Margaret Atwood” 195). Here, the implication is that Atwood’s violent woman is less a window into the author than a mirror reflecting the reader’s self.

The cultural renegotiations over the meaning and relevance of violence are perhaps most explicitly revealed in a fifth way that critics have read Atwood’s harmful women. Imagining events of female brutality as a source of instruction and the violent woman as a didactic figure, many critics have placed a positive valence on Atwood’s female violence, while bearing in mind the negative and long-enduring effects such acts can simultaneously incite. Responding to the epigraph of The Robber Bride, which claims that “A rattlesnake that doesn’t bite teaches you nothing,” Howells observes that “Zenia is more than a threat; she is also a teacher” (“The Robber Bride” 91), thereby bringing to light the ways in which Zenia, as embodiment of both female and Canadian otherness, forces her three female friends to identify the elements of alterity and foreignness also found within themselves. Similarly situating Zenia as a preceptive figure, Heilmann states that her various invasions and harmful behaviors have “didactic and even therapeutic side-effects” (180) on other characters, while Alice Palumbo comparably
finds that accepting Zenia means learning to embrace “[one’s] own potential for hostility, anger, and rage” (83), thereby indicating the critical intersections between viewing Zenia as instructor and recognizing her as uncanny Other. Moreover, this critical tendency to view Zenia as a didactic figure forces readers to carefully reconsider their beliefs and opinions concerning what kinds of violence are permissible, even valuable, or “therapeutic,” in society. To what extent do the instructive lessons learned from violence outweigh its deleterious effects? Who has the authority to condone certain forms of violence over others? Who has been forcibly silenced in efforts to define “acceptable” violence and, more broadly, violence itself?

Atwood’s widely acknowledged interest in promulgating connections between literature and society has provoked critics to view Atwood’s female violence in a sixth, but certainly not final, way that suggests how the violent woman reflects her increasingly violent society. Critics offering this perspective configure the violent woman as a social barometer and as a figure who, despite her often marginal status, lies at the heart of her society in signaling its broader social currents. Cooke’s alignment of the fictionalized representation of Grace Marks with the crimes and trial of Karla Homolka reveals how Atwood’s violent female figures have been read as indicative of violent trends in the society external to the fictional narrative, while other critics, such as Molly Hite, perceive how violent women in Atwood’s fiction reflect the societal violence and “universe of suffering” (“An Eye” 204) internal to the narrative. More precisely, Hite, in her analysis of Cat’s Eye, finds that the “death of Elaine’s brother, Stephen, at the hands of terrorists … replays the gender-enforcing torture of the nine-year-old Elaine at the hands of her purported [female] friends” (“An Eye” 191). Hite’s illuminating parallel not
only serves to indicate how the female violence Cordelia enacts against Elaine performs as a criterion of broader social and political abuses, but further suggests that, in order to survive and live with dignity in a society characterized by violence, females may feel compelled to engage in the self-same violence that elsewhere is victimizing and detrimental to their sense of worth.

Critical evaluations of Atwood’s violent women have left many questions unanswered and many areas of inquiry unexamined. Despite the early recognition of Atwood’s investment in social and humanitarian issues and the range of approaches that critics have employed to examine female brutality, many critical gaps remain and the general oversight of Atwood’s violent women is vastly incongruous with the numerous and diverse examples of such women that Atwood offers throughout her writing. Perhaps the most pressing concern made evident through the above overview of criticism is the manner in which issues and images of female violence in Atwood have consistently served as a secondary interest for critics. The oblique uses critics have hitherto made of Atwood’s female violence while pursuing other issues suggest that women’s aggression has not been regarded as a valuable critical pursuit in and of itself. What is lacking is an in-depth examination of female violence as a topic of serious literary consideration that offers important lessons and that resonates with pressing social, cultural and political issues. Moreover, the cursory consideration that many critics have offered Atwood’s violent women has prevented the development of a self-reflexive critical tradition within which female violence can be examined. The dispersed attempts of critics to address women’s aggression have neglected to build upon the groundwork of previous violence scholars or to acknowledge the rich tradition of violent female figures within Atwood’s
corpus. Resultant from this negligence is a rhizomic patterning of violence studies that converge on Atwood’s fiction, but that otherwise lack the coherence, perspective and self-reflexivity necessary for a strong critical tradition.

In addition to the secondary status of female violence in Atwood criticism, critics’ fascination with positioning Atwood’s violent women as emblematic of a broader Gothic tradition fictionalizes, rather than humanizes, female brutality and typically fixes the violent woman within the Gothic realm of the fantastic, in which divisions between the real and the unreal are obscured and one is never certain if, when encountering the violent woman, one is experiencing reality or has become “the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination” (Todorov 25). Although the interstices between the violent woman and Gothic conventions indicate the broader resonances female violence creates in cultural discourses and Atwood’s engagement with literary traditions, there is a vital need to secure the violent women within the realm of the real and the everyday before or alongside attempts to evaluate her imaginative potential. Similar to critics who regard female violence as an appropriation of masculine behavior, thereby rendering women’s brutality a conceptual impossibility and ultimately a fiction rather than a fact, efforts to understand the violent woman exclusively through literary conventions inhibit our ability to see her as a fully human figure with diverse and often shifting allegiances and motivations. Further, Atwood insistence that art is frequently engaged in “the violation of conventions” (“The Ancient Mariner” 169) indicates the tendency of literary works, and the lives they represent, to exceed the traditions that precede them.

Related to the placement of Atwood’s violent woman within Gothic paradigms is the widely-adopted critical tendency to frame her as a figure of the uncanny, where in
doing so, critics often pursue ways of thinking about female aggression that detach a woman’s violent compulsions from her otherwise integrated selfhood. Employed by numerous Atwood critics, this interpretive approach frequently imagines aggression as a fractured and severable aspect of female identity, rather than acknowledging the overlap and continuity between women’s violent and non-violent selves. Risking the compartmentalizing and fracturing of the female psyche, theories of the violent woman as dark double typically overlook how a woman’s acceptance of her violent inclinations often marks her movement towards psychic wholeness and, at times, her recognition of her full creative capacities.¹³ Not surprisingly, Atwood turns to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass*—which she insists is “always so useful in matters of the construction of alternate worlds” (*Negotiating* 56)—to examine this notion of duplicitous subjectivity and its hazards. Endlessly used by writers, critics, and theorists alike to examine issues such as language, the self and the Other, Carroll’s story is adopted by Atwood to suggest the enlarged perspective and articulatory abilities Alice gains when she foregoes destroying her mirror double and instead “merges with the other Alice” before “return[ing] to the waking world” (*Negotiating* 56). In other words, Atwood suggests that it is in accepting one’s full range of capacities, rather than repressing and denying one’s less acknowledged aspects of self, that new beginnings are forged and new perceptions are made possible.

Given the discontinuous and at times misleading frameworks of previous critical studies, it appears a challenge to launch a discussion on Atwood’s representations of violent women. In the absence of a firm critical foothold within Canadian and Atwoodian discourses, one is left wondering where to begin. Turning to broader cultural discussions
outside of this study’s specific area of inquiry, one similarly encounters a daunting absence of supportive conceptual spaces within which female violence can be contextualized and examined. The violent woman is, to adapt what has become a virtual cliché, left without a sympathetic discursive space of her own within which she can establish her belonging to an ideological community. Given this absence of hospitable conceptual terrains, the violent woman is rendered vagrant, and even further alienated from the advantages of having multiple, even contesting, sympathetic conceptual spaces through which her identity can be negotiated as a site of intersecting personal and socio-cultural forces. Calling into question Claudine Herrmann’s optimistic notion that “there is a physical space and a mental space for everyone” (168), this study draws attention to how broader cultural discourses outside of Atwoodian and Canadian scholarship have consistently evaded the reality of female brutality or manipulated its representation in such a way as to denaturalize women’s violent tendencies that Alix Kirsta insists “were always there from the beginning, but which centuries of male dominance seemed to have long conditioned out of them” (9).

Beyond the difficulty of addressing a topic as evasive as violence, female brutality has frequently been denied or cast as a pathological condition and, as such, has been refused a hospitable conceptual terrain within which to understand, rather than justify, women’s violence or a theoretical frame that would enable an examination of the deeply human motivations behind it. Especially significant is feminism’s role in perpetuating this critical oversight. Despite the discourses of exclusion that have been seminal to the feminist movement, and which have more recently proven useful to feminist critics of various orientations as a diagnostic compass to pinpoint the race, class,
and sexual orientation biases operant within feminism itself, feminist conversations have in large part failed to include empathetic discussions of violent women. By examining the violent woman alongside feminist precepts, possible reasons for this debarment are illuminated, revealing how abusive women undermine some of the traditional tenets of feminism which posit women as multiply inscribed victims and which envision women as participant in an empowering sisterhood that facilitates resistance to this victimization. The pervasive sense that discussing female violence is politically disadvantageous for women and will be used to further oppress them has hitherto compelled feminists to widely ignore abusive women, or to “[recast] them as victims, arguing their violence away” in order to “bring them back into the fold” (Pearson 24). While attempts to respond to female violence bring to light the current conceptual vagrancy of violent women, they further reveal the need for feminism to remain flexible and adaptive in order to respond to the endless differences existent within the category of “woman,” and the ramifications if it does not.

The challenge critics encounter in attempting to discern a conceptual space within which to situate and evaluate Atwood’s violent women at the foremost signals the difficulty of engaging the topic of violence, where any attempt to define the violent impulse is an endeavor to contain and prescribe a reality that consistently eludes shape and control. Those attempting to examine violence as it variously appears over time and space are exasperated to find that they are left “with an almost undifferentiated and abstract concept of violence” (McNaught 376) that fails to delimit its precise meaning, an effect that many have assumed is due to the absence of reason in the violent act. Jalna Hanmer and Sheila Saunders similarly find that “Defining violence is extremely difficult.
Reaching any agreement on a definition is even more difficult. Individual and collective agreements about the use of violence in certain circumstances vary enormously when confronted with specific situations” (30), suggesting that the evasive meaning of violence has less to do with its irrationality than with the infinite number of variables surrounding it. While our recognition of certain acts, responses, patterns, and symbols associated with brutality have enabled violence-centric discourses to thrive in various communities, the emotions generated in response to harm are widely variable. Vigdis Broch-Due argues that the “shock and terror created by violence … seems [sic] to be an uncomplicated and natural reaction to it but there are other residues of violence which are less immediate and more ambiguous” (17), indicating how definitions of violence focusing exclusively on its emotional “residues” are unreliable. More broadly, the codes used to discern violence are continually changing, and it is not always clear to all participant in, or witness to, a violent event when, where, or how an act of violence has taken place. Violence in all its manifestations inherently creates an unstable and paranoid universe to the extent that it undermines attempts to arrive at objective and accurate evaluations. Yet the violence enacted by women in particular has been neglected due to the culture of denial surrounding women’s capacity to do harm. Similar to Betty Friedan and her identification of the restlessness and discontent of many middle-class and educated women in the 1960s as “the problem that has no name” (15), Atwood in her writing of women’s violence aims to “name the hitherto unnamed” (Negotiating xx) and to reconsider the traditional repudiation of women’s potential for “bad behavior” (“Spotty-Handed” 157).

Profoundly disrupting the conventional associations of women with moral superiority, the proliferation of life, and witnesses to and victims of violence, female
brutality is an unsettling reality that many have denied and that “often goes unspoken and is, perhaps, ‘unspeakable,’ represent[ing] the darkest, deepest fears of the male order” (Vanessa Friedman 64). Traditionally configured as “an element of plot-space … and matter” (de Lauretis 251), women are further imagined as static and thoroughly embodied, and thus incapable of the transmutations of identity that are assumed necessary to shift from mother to murderer, or from victim to victimizer. While cultural attempts to force a procrustean image onto women have led to an intemperate denial of female brutality and a blindness that obscures those behaviors that transgress the margins of the “womanly possible,” the acknowledgements of female violence that have been made have often been couched in a rhetoric that achieves the identical effect of negating female violence. Like Davey in his early reading of *Life Before Man*, many cultural critics have defined female brutality as the violent woman’s borrowing of an essentially masculine behavior, rather than seeing her as instantiating a violence of her own. Naomi Segal, in suggesting that “violence is always by men (is, rather, an act in the masculine position)” (142), demonstrates how women’s natural use of violence has often been *denaturalized* in being coded an appropriation of male aggression. The societal refusal to see how women partake in violence as women exposes a conceptual gap created through restrictive gender discourses, and poses the further, and perhaps more grievous, problem of violent women misrecognizing themselves, imagining their female violence as non-violence in order to overcome the seeming contradiction of terms. Examining how women internalize society’s denial of female brutality, Phyllis Chesler posits that although many women engage in forms of cruelty, “most women will not readily admit, even to themselves, that they have behaved badly” (*Woman’s Inhumanity* 50).
Further exemplifying the lack of a hospitable conceptual terrain within which to situate the violent woman and the on-going societal efforts to transform and render more palatable aspects of female behavior that are incongruous with gender ideals, cultural imaginings of, and responses to, the violent woman have often cast her as a pathological aberration, rather than a demonstration of the wide range of human behaviors.\(^{16}\) Since the publication of *Criminal Women, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* in 1893, in which Cesare Lombroso concludes that an “exaggerated eroticism” (185) in women causes them to become hysterical and to behave in deviant and violent ways, representations of violent women have frequently been encoded in the language and images of an excessive female sexuality.\(^{17}\) While contemporary critics, such as James Gilligan, have proposed the necessity of viewing violence in general as “a symptom of individual or group psychopathology” (98) that emerges from, and in turn helps create, various psycho-social and biological systems, the construction of violence as pathology has been most extensively applied to women and modified to align with, and further mystify, women’s sexuality: the domain of female subjectivity that has always been most threatening to society and its stability. Refuting cultural assumptions that imagine women’s brutality as an appropriation of masculine conduct, eroticized representations of women’s violence insist on the plausibility of an authentically female brutality provided it is understood as inextricably linked to an immoderate female eroticism, a connection stemming from the traditional perception of sexuality as the “arena in which women express their wildness” (Hendin 201). Beyond the moral dilemmas raised through this provocative aestheticizing of violence, pathological constructions of female brutality problematically strip women of more than their vestments in diminishing their ethical responsibility. As such, societal
assumptions of the violent woman’s abnormality bring to the fore both questions about
women’s agency in harm, and indicate to Atwood how “Ways of going crazy are
culturally determined” (“Articulating” 114), where what is regarded as deviant in women
is often regarded as more fully human in men.

Feminism’s involvement in perpetuating the conceptual vagrancy of violent
women, and its reluctance to provide a critical terrain for open and humanizing
discussions about female violence, is noticeably incongruous with the conservative
myth that feminism’s liberation and empowerment of women is to blame for the rise in
female violence, a cultural fallacy notoriously supported by criminologist Freda Adler.
Yet perhaps the more disconcerting aspect of feminism’s refusal to hospitably address
female violence is the extent to which this dismissal misaligns with feminism’s public
identity as a refuge for the voices of all women and the history of women’s
marginalization out of which the feminist movement has emerged. More precisely, one of
the seminal reasons for the rise of feminism is that women within patriarchy have always
been positioned as outsiders. While the expressed purpose of feminist criticism is both
“to counter the limitations of ad hominem [‘to the man’] thinking … by asking a series of
questions addressed ad feminam [‘to the woman’]” (Sandra Gilbert “Ad Feminam” xi)
and to “find and release” voices that have been “lost, ignored, denied, devalued, and
repressed” (Grace “In Search” 35), feminist discourses, in refusing to offer a critical
space within which to explore and understand the nature of a female violence, have in
part failed to achieve feminism’s ideals. Moreover, Hélène Cixous’s widely-
acknowledged insistence that “Woman must write about women and bring women to
writing” (875) indicates the feminist awareness of how the inability to represent a
concept textually prevents its political representation, thus making feminism’s oversight of the pressing need to develop a critical and theoretical vocabulary to examine female violence all the more troubling.

Yet the absence of sympathetic discussions about female violence, or analyses of its human dimensions, within the discursive terrain of feminism is not indicative of feminism’s careless negligence. Rather, it indicates the ways in which abusive women inhabit a subject position that both runs contrary to feminism’s rejection of violence and that challenges specific ideological tenets of feminism that construct women as victims and global “sisters.” As such, Kirsta’s earlier cited understanding that violence has been conditioned out of women by “centuries of male dominance” is incomplete due to her failure to note how women have similarly been participant in obscuring women’s capacity to do harm. Often imagined as a tool of male oppression, violence is frequently constructed by feminists as antithetical to their pacifist objectives and to their belief that “self-affirmation can truly arise only out of creation, not out of destruction” (Hughes 286). While feminist critics are increasingly recognizing how women have made punctuated use of violence and militancy in furthering feminist causes,20 the inception of second-wave feminism was largely based on principles of anti-violence (“Ban the Bomb”) and anti-war movements. From the proto-feminist national women’s group Voice of Women (VOW), established in 1960 to bring provincial and federal attention to women’s issues, anti-militarism and peace activism, to later feminist initiatives such as Women’s Action for Peace, developed in 1982 following a Women and Militarism colloquium, many feminists have struggled against various forms of violence as “sociopolitical processes that signify the quintessential expression of masculine
aggression” (Sangarasivam 64). In “Uglypuss,” Atwood’s description of the phrase “Women make love. Men make war” (77) inscribed onto the women’s bathroom wall addresses this limited understanding of violence and gender, and suggests that feminists who hold such beliefs are supported by a broader community of women who attempt to dissociate themselves from harmful behaviors. Clearly, for many feminists, women’s use of violence signifies an appropriation and perpetuation of a masculine culture of brutality and the replacement of one tyrant with another, indicating both the continuity between feminism and other cultural conversations that identify violence as coded masculine and the essential paradox of female violence within feminist discourses. That is, female brutality has been both negated (because all violence is always already male) and imagined as a threatening presence that attests to the continuity of patriarchal practices and culture in the bodies of both men and women.

Further exemplifying the disjunction between violent women and feminism’s ideological foundations is the way in which women’s aggression contests feminist conceptions of women as victims. In describing elements of the “victim culture” (4) that she finds surrounds women, Kirsta notes the cries of “feminist outrage that greet any suggestion that women may have an equal tendency to violence” (5).21 Often constructing woman as a Persephone-like figure, many, but certainly not all, feminist critics have imagined victimhood as the common and irreducible identity of all women who live within androcentric societies and whose identity has left them vulnerable to race, class, and/or sexual orientation prejudices. As a seemingly inescapable base identity for women within feminism, victimhood serves as a platform that legitimizes women in their battle against various forms of oppression and paradoxically empowers women by
providing them with the grounds and motivation for resistance, yet at the same time
presumptively brands all women as indisputable victims. While this discussion does not
disclaim the widespread discriminations and the various abuses women have endured as a
targeted community within patriarchal societies, or dispute the injustice of women’s
institutionalized inequality, it does posit the danger of developing *a priori* assumptions
about the essential experience of all women and the need to discriminately assign the
status of victim. Astrid Henry has recently made note of this concern in identifying the
“victim feminism” established by feminist critics such as Catherine MacKinnon, Robin
Morgan and Andrea Dworkin that assumes women’s victimization from a vast array of
oppressive forces.22 Reflecting Kirsta’s earlier notion of women’s “victim culture,”
victim feminism has not only left feminists with no vocabulary to describe women whose
personal and public identities do not emerge from, or necessarily respond to, the
experience of victimization, but it has further offered women, in their essential
victimhood, a severely constricted space within which to live.

Challenging the feminist tendency to regard women as always already victims, the
violent woman rewrites scripts of femininity and typically rejects the “victim mythology”
that Rene Denfeld feels “has become the subtext of the [feminist] movement”
(“Feminists” 57). Women whose violence stems neither from a sense of oppression nor
from a history of victimization confound the rhetoric of feminism and signal the need to
move beyond gendered binaries of victim/victimizer and towards constructions of
individual complexity which more fully acknowledge a woman’s identity as a composite
of often conflicting subject positions. More specifically, in exposing the often shifting
identities of women between the roles of victim and victimizer, violent women trouble
societal beliefs in women’s static and formulaic relationship to violence, and, according to Atwood, force a recognition of the “full range of [women’s] response to the world” (“Tightrope-Walking” 220). Expanding on this idea, Atwood further explains that true gender equality means acknowledging women’s potential to be “equally bad as well as equally good” (“Margaret Atwood’s Address”). The feminist fear that a critical focus on women’s violence will detract attention away from the “real” oppression enacted by patriarchal agents and institutions is not only unfounded, but further restricts women’s participation in the real, a limitation that feminism for decades has striven to overcome. Within feminist frameworks, women are often circumscribed to performing, on some level, the role of victims and are often required to bear the marks of man’s violent potential without the possibility of demonstrating their own. Destabilizing this idea of an authoritative and original oppressor, violent women expose how violence is much more ambiguous and human than feminist ideology at times allows.

The continuation of many feminists to imagine all women as victims of varying degrees not only justifies in absolute terms the existence of feminism itself, but reinforces the sororial rhetoric underlying feminism, wherein women’s assumed membership in a sisterhood provides them with a means to resist their victimization. The fabled sisterhood of women popularized by second-wave feminism in the West seeks to establish a belief in the fundamentally similar experiences of discrimination and oppression endured by all women, and has inspired ambitious collections of feminist criticism such as Sisterhood is Global: The International Women’s Movement Anthology (1984), which espouse the idea of all women’s “same basic story” (Morgan 36). Combating the marginal status traditionally granted to women, notions of sisterhood allow feminists to conceive of an
empowering and self-supporting (yet ultimately imagined) community that holds women, their interests, and their experiences at its center. Chesler recalls her early encounters with the typically “ecstatic rhetoric” of sisterhood, yet further recollects the sense of fear in which notions of sisterhood were conceived, and later perpetuated: “we knew that we were doomed without sisterhood so we proclaimed it, even in its absence. We wanted to will it into existence, verbally, without wrestling it into being” (Woman’s Inhumanity 27). Chesler’s revealing retrospection both offers insight into the challenges limiting the achievement of an idealistic goal and suggests how notions of sisterhood belie the struggles that often characterize women’s relations with one another.

As with the feminist construction of women as victims, feminism’s understanding of women as experientially and emotionally connected to one another through a sororial relationship is destabilized by women’s violence, in particular that which is committed against other women. While recent feminist critics have done invaluable and extensive work in complicating notions of sisterhood, and revealing the divisions acknowledged and celebrated within feminist communities, the violent woman who victimizes other women creates a rupture in the feminist dream of solidarity that goes beyond social, cultural, or genealogical differences between women by exposing the discomforting reality that all women are capable of enacting violence in some form upon other women. Undermining the feminist belief in women’s easy and seemingly natural connections with one another, the violent woman typically evokes anxiety despite, or on account of, her resemblance to ostensibly non-violent women and reveals how notions of sisterhood “deny what women know: that [they] can be spiteful, mean, and malicious” (Laura Tracy 191). Sarah Sceats discerns that, in Atwood’s fiction in particular, women are often
“downright abusive” (119) to one another and that it is this harm, rather than sisterhood, that is naturalized, indicating how, “women are cruel, people are cruel, and this … can be perfectly routine” (116). Yet women’s frequent targeting of close female relations, rather than distant or unacquainted ones, in acts of brutality suggests that it is often through women’s inter-female bonds that violence is enacted. As such, popular notions of sisterhood are to an extent confirmed and denied through female violence, and it becomes clear that it is not sisterhood in its entirety that must be abandoned in the face of female brutality, but the connotations it carries of women’s uniformly nurturing and empowering interactions with one another. While Virginia Woolf, in 1929, brought to light the importance of creating a literary space to discuss women’s friendships and how “Chloe liked Olivia” (*A Room* 89), feminist critics are now faced with the need to examine the more shadowy relations between women.

While Roz’s recollection in *The Robber Bride* of the phrase “‘The Other Woman will soon be with us’” as something “the feminists used to say” (455) initially appears to suggest feminists’ desire to unconditionally accept marginalized and “Other” women into sororial circles, the mantra more accurately reflects how this inclusion is predicated on the veritable erasure of difference and on the transformation of the marginalized woman into a woman like “us.” That is, into someone who aligns with feminist ideology. The failure of feminism to offer the violent woman a conceptual space, or to seek to understand her as *she is*, further indicates how women’s violence radically interrupts the feminist ideal of unconditional female-female bonds and illuminates the exclusionary practices of feminism behind the front of familial metaphors. More significant, however, is recognizing how the consequences of this exclusion are far from one-sided. Given the
absence of an arena in which to negotiate their identity, literary representations of violent women are left without critical paradigms and a distinctive vocabulary that would both illuminate the motivations guiding female brutality and facilitate public recognition of the prevalence of female violence and its connections to natural, and at times normative,24 human behavior. Similarly, feminism’s failure to offer a discursive space in which issues of female brutality can be more fully examined insulates feminist discourses from the valuable lessons produced through disparity and the new ways of thinking often garnered through opposition. Feminism has suffered a significant loss in disregarding violent women, since those relegated to the margins can indeed reveal much about the nature of any collectivity and the various biases and gaps it conceals. Violent women, in exposing both the complications of widely applying notions of victimhood and the limits of sisterhood as a political metaphor, prompt feminist discourses to re-think and re-sensitize feminism’s foundational tenets, and to bring them into alignment with the full reality of women’s lives.

In response to the crisis of paradigms surrounding violent women and the lack of empathetic critical spaces within which to understand and examine, rather than encourage or condone, female brutality, there has been a gradual expansion of violence definitions and a discernible attempt to look outside of existing paradigms to address how women fit within violence discourses and how “the harm done [by women] is real” (Chesler, Woman’s Inhumanity 44). Rather than dwelling upon the evasive nature of violence in general and risk perpetuating the oversight of violent women, or offering oblivious non sequiturs that deny the existence of female brutality, many critics have begun to offer innovative ways of thinking about violence. Aiming to move beyond the definitions
offered by critics such as Rene Denfeld, who appears to have fallen behind the times in asserting that “the word violence is used to describe destructive, pointless aggression” (*Kill the Body* 7), and Darlene Lawson, who offers a limited definition of female violence as “reactive, spontaneous and not conscious” (138), Linda Bell broadens understandings of brutality and those participant in it by maintaining that “a more adequate understanding of violence focuses on … coercion,” adding that “Violence must be seen as the coercion itself, the control exerted by someone over the will, intellect, or limbs of another” (161). Beyond reminding us that the meaning of violence is socially constructed, Bell’s definitive statement recognizes the intentionality and power relations behind acts of violence, yet it also illuminates the wide variety of physical and non-physical acts that can be regarded as violent behaviors. Similarly exposing the paradox of how expanding definitions allows us to articulate the nature of violence with more precision, Elaine Scarry asserts that “everything is a [potential] weapon” (41), including words and domestic objects conventionally associated with the feminine. In prompting a radical reconception of the instruments of violence, Scarry both expands understandings of the tools and contexts of brutality and brings us closer to perceiving the veritable diversity of violent agents and acts. The various efforts to expand definitions of violence beyond the realms of the nonsensical, the physical and the masculine allow us to read and recognize alternative modes of violence and to render visible previously indiscernible acts of female brutality.

In her interview with Geoff Hancock, Atwood similarly reveals her participation in extending cultural definitions and inciting her readers to perceive their surroundings in novel ways by explaining her dedication to “Expand[ing] the possibilities of the
language” (200). Echoing, or perhaps inspiring, critical efforts to transgress constrictive definitions of cultural terms, Atwood insists on the tendency of semantics to shift and undergo change, and she views it as the writer’s responsibility to aid this process by making new patterns from old language, since it is only through the expansion or re-arrangement of a language, such as the combining of the terms “female” and “violence,” that we can align our idiom with reality and “get the words to stretch and do something together that they don’t do alone” (“Tightrope-Walking” 200). Atwood further investigates this matter in identifying how a societal reality, such as female violence, can exist even if “We don’t have [a word for] that concept” (“Using What You’re Given” 141); here, Atwood suggests that the writer’s responsibility is, in part, to create terms to describe her continually changing environment, or expand existing terms to encompass it. At the center of Atwood’s fictional work is a message conveying the power of words to change our understanding of our world, and the need to see beyond our present language.

Aiming to expand conventional definitions of violence and to reveal Atwood’s shared interest in this goal, this study focuses on four interconnected modes of female violence in Atwood’s fiction, including psychological violence, physical violence, indirect violence, and self-directed violence. Yet a discussion of these varying forms of brutality must be preceded by a few important provisos. While acutely aware of the conceptual tyranny that can result from the imposition of titles, and the limitations frequently posed in creating categories, this discussion nonetheless maintains the necessity of applying the title of violence to certain female behaviors due to the harmful and often long-enduring consequences that such actions entail, the social resonance carried by the term “violence” that confers a degree of gravity to actions affiliated with it,
and the productive dissonance this term multiply generates when juxtaposed with the descriptive “female.” Further, this discussion does not propose an essentialist argument in which the aforementioned modes of violence are intrinsically linked to female subjectivity. Rather, the four types of violence proposed reveal how all humans are capable of participating in modes of violence, and how women in Atwood’s fiction have tended towards specific ways of engendering violence that at times align with, yet at other times disrupt, female socialization and gender paradigms.

Expanding notions of violence to non-corporeal realms, psychological violence reflects Scarry’s belief in the pervasiveness of weaponry by revealing how words can become tools of violence. While verbal attacks targeting a victim’s sense of selfhood, security, and well-being are frequently referred to as “verbal abuse” or, as Elaine in Cat’s Eye terms it, “verbal danger” (234), there has hitherto been a widespread reluctance to associate such behaviors with acts of violence because they are unlikely to result in severe physical injury or bodily death. In not leaving behind physical scars, psychological violence is both assumed to occur without real harm and is currently exempted from criminal codes of abuse in Canada. Yet Jo Freeman’s account of how an individual’s interiority can become a “bloody pulp” following a lifetime of “verbal whipping” (217), Chesler’s observation that “verbal abuse, coupled with social ostracism, can damage girls in a lasting way” (Death 41), and Natalie Angier’s pronouncement that “the most piercing and persistent tools” of female violence are “psychological tools” (269) insist on the identification of psychological abuse as a form of violence and a mode of brutality that is not wholly distinguishable from acts of physical harm. In the words of Joan in Lady Oracle, “Words [are] not a prelude to war but the war itself” (57). Similarly,
Charis’s explanation in *The Robber Bride* of the pain resultant from Zenia’s intentionally abusive words, in which she felt “as if a net of hot sharp wires [were] being pulled tight around her, the hairline burns cutting into her skin” (495), indicates how psychological violence can often be experienced as a direct attack on the body. Highlighting Atwood’s belief that “The most lethal weapon on earth is the human mind” (“Canadian-American” 391), such examples suggest how women’s harmful utterances urge a reconsideration of violence and how the points of contact between individuals are not exclusively physical.

This inclination to equate psychological violence with physical acts is both one of central importance for many Atwood critics, such as Grace, who finds that in Atwood’s fiction psychological and physical victimization “are inseparable” (“Articulating” 13), and one that necessitates further consideration to the extent that it illuminates the *modus operandi* of psychological violence. Similar to physical brutality, acts of psychological abuse use harmful words to transgress the surface of the victim’s body, where such utterances perform as a weapon and self-extension of the victimizer that allows her to project her presence beyond the immediate space occupied by her body and into the interior of her victim to act upon his/her perceptions and affects. In other words, both psychological and physical violence enact a violation of the victim’s bodily boundaries, act upon sentient surfaces, and engender a variable degree of suffering and distress in the victim. Yet the characteristics that distinguish psychological violence from physical harm, most notably the lack of tangible marks and surface scars in the former, are the very characteristics that ensure its brutality; in lacking a physical sign, psychological abuse is typically repeated by the victimizer in order to ensure her message is internalized and remembered. While psychological wounds may be easier to ignore or
discount because they are not visually startling, the very real harm enacted by psychological violence cautions us to recognize how the primary determinant of violence should not be the visibility of the scars it produces.

As the most conceptually disconcerting form of female brutality, physical violence disrupts the notion of the female body as ornament and a surface that is acted upon, as well as the social lessons instilled in women to avoid displays of anger and hostility. Angier asserts that from girlhood, “Physical aggression [in women] is discouraged … in manifold and aggressive ways. Not only are they instructed against offensive fighting; they are rarely instructed in defensive fighting” (265). The pervasive bias against women’s ability or inclination to enact physical violence and the masculine bias of criminological descriptions of assault signal the cultural and legal factors enabling a denial of female violence and the need to deconstruct social scripts defining gender appropriate behavior. In spite of the societal disbelief in women’s capacity to do physical harm, the fact remains that violence is not an inherently male behavior; women, in acting as women, use their bodies and physical weapons as tools that can be used against men, other women, themselves and non-human life forms. Before women can be understood as fully human, they must be recognized for the ways in which they have used their bodies in variously, and even simultaneously, productive and destructive, loving and hurtful ways. The challenge of viewing women’s physical violence as co-existing with, rather than contradicting, a variety of other female subject positions, such as mother, wife, sister, and daughter, also marks the goal of recognizing how a woman’s life is never told through a single story, but through a collection of tales signaling a diversity of experiences.
The behaviors that fall under the third category of women’s indirect violence reveal how violent behaviors have not always been as direct as psychological violence, or as explicit as physical violence. While the term “indirect” may initially suggest an act that is unintended or accidental, indirect violence here describes a violent act that aims to harm another in either physical or psychological ways through the actions of one or more mediating agents. Exemplified by acts such as gossiping, backbiting, enlisting others through coercion or persuasion to carry out acts of direct harm on another, and also by larger scale operatives such as governmental and corporate violence, indirect violence enables women to remain anonymous and invisible. Extending from what women know, indirect forms of violence build upon women’s cultural education that teaches them to achieve power indirectly and through their affiliations, rather than in a more immediate manner, and their socialization as figures of interpersonal mediation, where the effectiveness of indirect violence “is tied to the fluency of a person’s social intelligence” (Angier 266). Despite the seeming obscurity of such contrived acts of violence, the pervasiveness of this type of brutality in Atwood’s fiction and Atwood’s own sense that girls are given greater opportunities “to be more manipulative and conspiratorial and Machiavellian” (“Beaver’s Tale” 159) indicates the frequency and facility with which women “camouflage their intent to hurt others” (Jack 4) and deliver their violence in covert ways.

Insisting that women’s indirect violence is more than petty hostility and holds the capacity to effect great harm, Chesler maintains that “Gossip can break one’s heart and spirit. Gossip can also lead to ‘social’ death and, sometimes, even to physical death” (Woman’s Inhumanity 156), reflecting the nascent societal understandings of such acts as
violence that is made manifest in phrases such as “vicious rumors.” The unfair fighting grounds typically created in indirect violence, wherein the victim is generally not anticipating an attack, and may initially be unaware that one is occurring, mark the defenselessness of the victim exposed to this type of violence, and thus her/his increased vulnerability. The cordiality and seeming passivity frequently displayed by a woman in her indirect violence is disarming to her victim and disguises the violent woman’s underlying intent to harm her victim and to manipulate and control her agents. Similar to psychological and physical violence, in which the self is extended through voice and physical weapons, respectively, indirect violence further illuminates the nature of violence as an act of self-extension by revealing how the bodies, behaviors, and voices of others can serve to increase the reach of an abusive individual, while placing such mediating agents, or human weapons, on morally ambiguous grounds. While women “learn that a safe way to attack someone else is behind her back, so that she will not know who is responsible” (Chesler Woman’s Inhumanity 76), the harm enacted by indirect violence and the understanding of such behaviors as acts of the violent woman’s self-extension, rather than her self-extrication, call for accountability to be placed upon the orchestrating figure behind such acts of indirection. Through this placing of blame and responsibility, the mechanics of indirect violence are rendered visible and the abusive woman is forced to reckon with the veritable harm she has engendered.

Diametrically opposed to such forms of violence in which the perpetrator is remote from the victim is the fourth type of violence highlighted by this study, in which the perpetrator and the victim are the selfsame. The surprising prevalence of women who self-harm in Atwood’s fiction has been troublingly overlooked by critics, thus
perpetuating the culture of silence that has come to surround the topics of suicide and auto-victimization, and limiting the possibility of perceiving how, according to Dusty Miller, a woman who self-injures “acts against herself in the role of the abuser” (72). This critical oversight is perhaps explained in part by the seeming incomprehensibility of self-destructive acts and the deeply aversive responses they frequently elicit, which suggest how “Self-mutilation … is a profound phenomenon that defies ready comprehension and rational response” (Favazza 4). Gavin Fairbairn similarly points to the “poverty of our language for discussing suicidal harm” (xiii), thereby exposing the reluctance of many to connect self-harm to any rational, much less sympathetic, framework. However, by examining self-harm as violence and thus linking self-destructive acts to a more familiar social phenomenon, we can begin to create spheres of meaning around acts of suicide and self-mutilation where before there were fear and reticence. That others throughout history have similarly discerned the value of viewing self-harm as violence, including Dante Alighieri, who claims that violence done to “ourselves” is one of the “three ways violence is shown” (Canto xi:29), Immanuel Kant, who characterizes suicide as a violence against ourselves (53), Terence O’Keeffe, who similarly identifies the act as one of “self-killing” (47), and Alfred Alvarez, who traces the etymology of the term to its derivative roots that reflect suicide as a form of homicide and which evince “the associations with murder” (45), suggests how there is less a “poverty of … language” to discuss self-harm than a failure to discern the appropriate terms already present in critical discourse. Moreover, while violence, as this discussion has shown, carries its own hermeneutic challenges, the theoretical framing of
violence offered through this study can be similarly applied to gestures of self-injury to productive ends, \(^{37}\) and to explicate the appearance of self-abuse in Atwood’s fiction.

In an effort to ameliorate the lack of supportive conceptual discussions surrounding women’s violence and to provide an overarching framework for the four modes of female brutality outlined above, this discussion theorizes violence as a communicative act in which harmful behaviors participate in meaning-making and processes of representation. Reflecting the work of Josephine Hendin, whose notion of “communicative violence” explicates how female brutality is “an adventure in language” (36) and an act which is “richly communicative” (244)\(^{38}\) and extending the observations of Neil Whitehead, who identifies “the role violence can play as meaningful cultural expression” (41), this study imagines the communicatory capacities of female violence as one way among many of approaching female brutality and as a productive start to further conceptual discussions. While configuring violence as a way of conveying meaning helps to illuminate violence in general to the extent that communicative structures necessarily entail a sender and a receiver of a message, thus creating a valuable space for the perspective of the victim in understandings of violence, this conceptual framing resonates with female violence in particular by challenging the culture of silence surrounding female violence and what Vanessa Friedman identifies as women’s lack of access to “a public language which may accurately and satisfactorily express their needs and desires, one that is accepted and understood by the masculine social order” (66). For some, the alignment of violence with communication may at first seem an absurd attempt to bridge a vast gulf between widely dissimilar concepts resulting in the obscuring of brutality behind the façade of a benign and familiar activity. Yet the cost of not explicating female
violence through an everyday conceptual frame, and thereby keeping such violence within the realm of the exceptional and deviant, suggest how the avoidance of such a theoretical approach would be, by far, the greater blunder.

This attempt to understand female violence as a mode of communication, beyond undermining both cultural images of the violent woman as a lone figure by examining her in a relational and affiliative light and societal understandings of violence as antisocial behavior, further indicates how the nature of violence is not self-evident and how brutality is always more than an act of destruction. Imagining female violence as an act undertaken by a woman in her effort to create and convey an infinite variety of meanings requires recognizing the connection that exists between generation and devastation. Joan’s witnessing in *Lady Oracle* how physical abuse can perform as “an open and direct method of expressing your feelings” (247) and Lorna Irvine’s observation of “the tension between destruction and creation” (“One Woman” 101) existent in *Power Politics* and *You Are Happy* mark how this sense of the equivocating and ambivalent nature of violence aligns well with the individual stories and broader thematics of Atwood’s work. Placing female violence alongside inherently generative images of communication calls us to view the violent woman as one who struggles against disorder in her effort to create meaning, yet in doing so burdens her words and gestures with a secondary effect in which they perform as vehicles of harm, thereby destabilizing the division between creation and destruction. While acknowledging the potential of violence to do great and even irreparable harm, this positioning of violence as an act that stems from a desire for communication insists on the need to regard violence as a deeply human behavior and accounts for the diversity and fluidity of the violent act that other conceptual approaches
disallow. Similar to the multivalent nature of Atwood’s own textual constructions of brutality, in which violence is depicted alongside meaningful messages that indicate her refusal to “put [the reader] through a lot of blood and gore for nothing” (“Using What You’re Given” 151), the locutionary intent behind most acts of female violence signals how destruction is intimately connected with an expressive power and how “language is everything you do” (Surfacing 139).

Constructions that equate female brutality with communication are useful in drawing attention to the interrelations the violent woman attempts to establish with her victims, yet this theoretical framework further operates on a metatextual level to illuminate the connection Atwood strives to create with her readers. Building on the work of previous critics who have interpreted the violent woman in Atwood’s fiction as a figure who reflexively comments on issues central to her society, this study focuses on Atwood’s employment of the brutalizing woman as a means to convey to her readership the indispensability of critiquing dominant socio-cultural discourses. In doing so, she positions the violent woman as a paradoxical insider/outsider figure who destabilizes inadequate social narratives and creates a space for their revision. More precisely, while bellicose women are typically relegated to the margins of the social body on account of the harmful behaviors they enact, such women’s proclivity for dramatically revising narratives central to Western society indicate the necessity of recognizing their simultaneous eccentricity and centricity. To the extent that such figures embody the characteristics of the Möbius strip and the Klein bottle that Atwood highlights in Cat’s Eye (218), which Elaine finds radically destabilize the division between inside and
outside positionalities, the violent woman occupies a privileged space in Atwood’s fiction that enables her to unsettle ideological frames in powerful ways.

In order to more fully understand the theoretical framing of female violence as a mode of communication, however, it is necessary to recognize the ways in which violence is potentially a miscommunication and an act of failed disclosure. Notwithstanding the powerful and revisionary messages Atwood disseminates to readers through her violent women, the use of violent behaviors as communicative means by characters inside Atwood’s texts typically results in misconstrued meaning, and the perpetuation of confusion between the victimizer and victim. Atwood’s exasperation with literary representations of violent women in which they are depicted to “have no motives” (“The Curse” 221) illustrates the need to recognize how a woman’s motivation for violence is not always the desire for violence itself, but the impulse to express an infinitely variable number of emotions, thoughts, and sentiments. However, the lack of a shared cultural language matching stable and specific meanings to particular acts of violence prevents the abusive act from performing as a credible, or effective, mode of communication between the violent woman and her victim. The same violent act may be used repeatedly by a character, yet the meaning intended behind each act is likely to shift with each consecutive use with no observable indication of the semantic change that has taken place, rendering violence an act that does not always mean what it says and that does not refer to a stable code that would allow other characters to discern its meaning. Indicating how the principles of semiology extend to all processes and forms of representation, the framing of female violence as communication inevitably leads to the recognition that brutality is a subjectively coded act and that the signifier of female
violence is without a corresponding stable signified element. Cultural phrases describing violence as an “inexplicable” and “senseless” act reveal that while violence may be intended as a means of communication, and may even achieve this aim on the metatextual plane, on the textual level it remains an unstable signifier that is both disjoined from its intended symbolic meaning and widely received by other characters as bearing the break down of signification.

The individual chapters of this study illuminate how female violence, as a communicative act, engages and challenges various socio-cultural discourses by following a thematic structure that aligns with what Hendin identifies as the “gathering of energies and arguments that, taken together, seize control of the subject of female aggression” (2). More precisely, chapter two examines the various mythologies that define Canada and its people, and how the violent woman troubles these mythologies by inciting recognition of national identity as a narrative process open to re-evaluation. Through an examination of *Surfacing* alongside “The Man From Mars,” “Uglypuss,” and “Hairball,” this chapter exposes how the violent woman re-defines the Canadian imaginary to include those aspects that Canadians have long overlooked or learned to mis-recognize in themselves. The third chapter moves away from this focus on national narratives to highlight the discourses that similarly shape our understanding of art, and those who participate in it. Here, the violent woman can be seen to engage in revisionary work by exposing the limits of the Red Shoes Syndrome that has in many ways come to define the fraught connection between the female artist and her art. In several of Atwood’s artist fictions, including *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*, the female protagonist is able to evade the self-directed violence anticipated by this social
narrative through the use of projective strategies, indicating how the capacity for divergent thought can be helpful, rather than harmful, to women and the failure of conceptual frameworks to pre-determine the fate of the individual artist. The final chapter examines Atwood’s on-going fascination with “mythologies of various kinds” (“Preserving” 32) and the mythic revisions in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and *The Tent* in order to highlight the veritable range of female violence and the possibility, and at times necessity, of responding to these behaviors in ways that circumnavigate traditionally masculine forms of justice ethics. Reinforcing Margaret Somerville’s assertion that “Myths have a role to play in ethics” (15) by providing an arena to contemplate difficult questions, this chapter arrives at the observation that Atwood’s myths value moral multiplicity over singular or final solutions, and invite readers to see how individual moral stances are inadequate to address the complex situations arising from acts of female violence. Collectively, these discussions indicate how Atwood, far from offering the violent woman as a panacea to the social problems represented in her fiction, draws on the instability rendered by such figures to propose how there is value in imagining women otherwise, and how female violence reflexively comments on the society within which it is situated.

____________________

**Notes**

1 For example, Catherine Rainwater asserts that Joan’s attacking of the reporter at the end of *Lady Oracle* is a demonstration of her “physical power” and her “refus[al] to be a physical victim” (25), while Frank Davey identifies Joan as a figure of “excessive sentimentality” whose assault is a part of the denouement that leaves Joan “in a deeply flawed male world” (59) of the “Gothic plot formula” (60), thus illustrating the vastly incongruous interpretations surrounding Atwood’s violent women and the unsettled critical frames within which they have been placed.

2 See Atwood’s interview with James McElroy in *Waltzing Again* (169).

3 For an elaboration on this distinction, see Atwood’s interview “Defying Distinctions.”
Also see note 33.

These categories of violence, as may be expected, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they frequently intersect with one another in Atwood’s fiction, thereby revealing the multidimensionality of her violence representations.

Also see René Girard (257) and Vigdis Broch-Due (2, 18-19).

In addressing the notion of free will, Atwood explains that “everyone’s choices are limited, and women’s choices have been more limited than men’s, but that doesn’t mean women can’t make choices” (“Spotty-Handed” 168).

The closest approximation of a definition of violence in the Canadian Criminal Code is found in Sections 265-268, which offer legal definitions of various forms of “Assault,” but make no mention of the term “violence.” Moreover, “violence” has been used to define various criminal acts, such as “Homicide” (Section 222), “Robbery” (Section 343), “Intimidation” (Section 423) and “Serious Personal Injury Offence” (Section 752), yet no precise definition is offered to the term itself.

For example, Sandra Djwa’s “Deep Caves and Kitchen Linoleum: Psychological Violence in the Fiction of Alice Munro” extends understandings of violence to noncorporeal realms by maintaining that violence can be psychological and that enemies can enact harm in non-physical ways.

Lorna Irvine similarly characterizes Zenia in The Robber Bride as a “vampire character” who “sucks the life out of the novel’s male characters” (“Recycling” 205).

See Atwood’s comic “The Radio Interview” (reprinted in Nischik “Murder in the Dark” 4), in which she satirizes the tendency of critics to imagine her resemblance to her fictional creations.

Individual critics have additionally approached Atwood’s violent women in a number of idiosyncratic ways, such as aligning her with fairy tale conventions (Rigney 65), and animalistic behaviors (Hollis 126).

See Dana Crowley Jack’s Behind the Mask and Kirsta’s Deadlier Than the Male (17).

In particular, see Adrienne Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” in which she delineates the ways in which white Western feminists have marginalized other demographics of women, leading her to call for feminism to “de-Westernize itself” (225).

This focus on feminism’s construction of women’s victimhood and sororial connections is not intended as a reductive attempt to narrow the widely ranging interests of feminism to a few manageable tenets, but rather an effort to begin a critical discussion of the ways in which women’s violence sits uncomfortably with certain feminist precepts.

See Chesler’s Woman’s Inhumanity to Women (35-77).

Also see Martha McCaughey and Neal King’s (Eds) Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies.

While Atwood has, in the past, been variously hailed as a leading proponent of feminist issues in Canada, and adopted by the feminist movement as a figurehead, the failure of feminist discourses to create a conceptual space for Atwood’s violent women is reflected by critics such as Gayle Greene, who finds that Cat's Eye “repudiates the feminist terms that might make sense of the tale it tells” (201) and Shirley Neuman, who, while acknowledging Offred’s violent impulses, views such violence, and The Handmaid’s Tale as a whole, as reflective of the “[negative] reactions to the successes of the women’s movement” (859) in the early 1980s.
19 See Alder’s *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal*.
20 In particular, see Ruth Roach Pierson’s “Global Issues” (385-388), and Carol Ehrlich’s *Socialism, Anarchism and Feminism*, in which Ehrlich maintains that “Anything less than a direct attack on upon all the conditions of our lives is not enough” (28) and that the “essential tasks in the building of a new and truly human world” include “Destroy[ing] capitalism. End[ing] patriarchy. Smash[ing] heterosexism” (29).
21 Also see Rene Denfeld’s *Kill the Body, the Head Will Fall* (101-108).
22 Henry borrows the term “victim feminism” from Naomi Wolf who, in *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*, suggests its opposition to an emerging “power feminism.”
23 The image of women’s sisterhood was perhaps first made widely available to women through the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which marked the movement away from the mentality of first-generation feminists and their focus on the individual woman and her particular oppressions and towards an imagining of women’s shared consciousness and the limitations experienced *en masse* by an entire generation of young, white, middle-class women in 1950s and 1960s America.
24 In his discussion of *Bodily Harm*, Frank Davey observes that Rennie, as a result of her hard-learned girlhood lessons, has grown into a woman who is able to be in and look at the world without making physical contact with it (70). Expanding on this observation, it is possible to see how certain forms of female abusiveness, such as psychological and indirect violence, are responsive to society’s lessons of femininity.
25 See Atwood’s interview with Karla Hammond in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (112).
26 Atwood’s own avoidance of gender essentialism is made evident in her assertion that androgyny “certainly exists” (“Preserving Mythologies” 31), and in her insistence that, when discussing female characters, she is not dealing with “members of a separate species” (“A Question” 54).
27 An exception to this critical misunderstanding is Davey, who notes how the “violence” exemplified in *Power Politics* is one of “psychological abuses” (*Margaret Atwood* 27), thus revealing his awareness of how Atwood is employing images of violence in unconventional and expanded ways.
28 While Section 264 of the Canadian Criminal Code indicates that “Uttering threats” is a form of assault, this section further specifies that it is only those threats which give warning of either “death or bodily harm,” or damage to another’s “real or personal property,” that are punishable by law.
29 Scarry’s definition of the weapon as “an object that goes into the body and produces pain” (56) reveals how harmful words received and internalized by a victim can, and should, be included under the conceptual category of “weapon.”
30 Dana Crowley Jack similarly notes how “many women incorporate cultural myths that women are not aggressive while their own experience contradicts it” (7).
31 For a definition of corporate violence see Walter DeKeseredy and Ronald Hinch’s *Woman Abuse: Sociological Perspectives* (100).
32 The Canadian Criminal Code similarly finds the individual arranging acts of indirect harm accountable for the harm incurred when, in Section 265 subsection 1, it states that “A person commits an assault when, without the consent of another person, he applies
force intentionally to that other person, *directly or indirectly*” (emphasis added). Similarly for homicide, Section 222 subsection 1 states that “A person commits homicide when, *directly or indirectly*, by any means, he causes the death of a human being” (emphasis added).

Acts of self-harm in Atwood’s fiction include: the suicidal thoughts of all the female characters in *Life Before Man*, Yvonne in “The Sunrise” (*Bluebeard’s Egg*), Joanne in “True Trash” (*Wilderness*), Portia in “Wilderness Tips” (*Wilderness*), and the first-person narrator in “Weight” (*Wilderness*); the anorexic eating patterns of Marian in *The Edible Woman*, the narrator of *Surfacing*, and Robyn in “Spring Song of the Frogs” (*Bluebeard’s*); the self-destructiveness of Bo’s female lover in “Hair Jewelry” (*Dancing*), the narrator’s mother in “Bring Back Mom” (*Tent*), Gloria in *The Robber Bride*, Lizzie in *Moral Disorder*, Elaine in *Cat’s Eye*, Joan in *Lady Oracle*, and Iris in *The Blind Assassin*; the possible suicides of Zenia at the end of *The Robber Bride*, and Lois’s childhood friend Lucy in “Death by Landscape” (*Wilderness*); the suicides of Ofglen and Offred’s predecessor in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Laura in *The Blind Assassin*.

While critics have commented on isolated instances of self-directed violence, highlighting, for example, the “self-destruction that dominates [*Life Before Man*]” (Hutcheon “From Poetic” 23), and Elaine’s decision in *Cat’s Eye* “to mutilate her own body, tearing the skin from her feet” (White 162), there has been little effort to document, or provide a nuanced critical frame for, the numerous distressing acts of female self-harm that are woven throughout Atwood’s fiction, or to account for why some women are able to overcome these behaviors.

Others have attempted to create meaning around gestures of self-harm by carrying over the Victorian conception of suicide as a specifically “female malady.” For example, Miller finds that women’s self-abuse responds to their socialization which has inculcated them with the belief that “allowing themselves to be hurt or humiliated is far more socially acceptable than being aggressive or violent toward others” (5), thereby compelling women to “act out by acting in” (6). Margaret Higonnet similarly finds that the “destructive narcissism [of suicide] seems to some particularly feminine” (69), thus suggesting that self-destruction can be regarded as an act performed from the female position.

Dante further argues that violence “To God … or neighbours may be done” (Canto xi:31).

This theoretical framing, as will become clear, positions violence as a reflection of broader social and cultural practices, as a paradoxical act of creation and destruction, and as a deeply human act of attempted communication that can be engendered in psychological, physical and indirect ways. In demonstrating the suitability of self-harm within this theoretical frame, Mary Douglas, for instance, asserts that in acts of self-mutilation “What is being carved in human flesh is an image of society” (143), and Marilee Strong finds that “In addition to being a life-sustaining and sanity-maintaining way of managing inner states, [self-] cutting is a primitive yet powerful form of communication for people unable to adequately verbalize their feelings” (44). Strong’s observation in particular deflates the common misperception that self-harm exclusively signifies an individual’s attempts to destroy the self by exposing how such behaviors can
be paradoxically engendered as a means of self-preservation, thus signaling the diverse intensions potentially driving self-injurious acts.  
38 Also see Hendin’s *The Heartbreaker Effect* (36-44).
Chapter 2

Negotiating the Nation: The Reproduction and Reconstruction of the National Imaginary

although in every culture many stories are told, only some are told and retold, and …

these recurring stories bear examining.

(Atwood *Strange Things* 13)

What a society buries is at least as revealing as what it preserves.

(Atwood “Mathews and Misrepresentation” 147)

In a lecture delivered as part of the Clarendon Lecture Series at Oxford University in the spring of 1991, Margaret Atwood discusses the building of national mythologies and prompts her listeners to re-examine a central Canadian emblem and their thoughts on Canadian national identity by provocatively questioning, “You thought the national flag was about a leaf, didn’t you? Look harder. It’s where someone got axed in the snow” (*Strange Things* 14). Through this simple semiological exercise, Atwood invites a radical shift in the perception of Canada’s collective consciousness and a re-evaluation of what she terms “the great Canadian victim complex” (Gibson 22) in order to reveal both the capacity of Canadians to do harm to others and the violence that exists unremarked at the heart of the Canadian signature. This renegotiation of national discourses is similarly demonstrated in Atwood’s use of the violent woman as a destabilizing figure who, through her brutality, points towards broader social trends and re-configures various centralized myths of Canadian identity. Atwood’s formulation of the violent woman as an individual who reconceptualizes the dominant national imaginary, or the limited set of often mutually-reinforcing ideals and images that Canadians frequently draw on to
construct and maintain their sense of national identity,\textsuperscript{40} may \textit{prima facie} appear an inconvenient and anomalous configuration. Yet Atwood, through this gesture, builds upon long-established cultural frameworks linking the nation to gender and violence, not only insisting on the enduring relevance of nationalism and national conceits, but also the need to see the nation’s genius as a construct in constant flux. From Atwood’s \textit{Surfacing} (1972) to such short stories as “The Man From Mars” (1977), “Uglypuss” (1983), and “Hairball” (1991), the violent woman uncovers how the reputed vulnerability, multiculturalism, cooperative economy, and propriety central to the Canadian identity are open to interrogation and re-interpretation; despite her marginal status within society, the violent woman is a meaningful and revealing figure that forces a reconsideration of Canada’s central mythologies. What emerges from this critical endeavor is not a reformed or corrective image of Canada’s national identity, since no singular figure can possibly signify the cultural heterogeneity existent within a country, but recognition of the need to “Look harder” and to question those national narratives that Canadians hold timeless and of themselves.

Contemporary critics and theorists of nationhood have endlessly struggled against the inherent difficulties of thinking nationally, and Canadian scholars in particular at times contend with the self-effacing possibility that the very conceit they attempt to analyze and delimit may in fact not exist at all.\textsuperscript{41} One of the fundamental reasons for the apprehensiveness surrounding discussions of the nation and national identity is the shifting conception of what constitutes nationhood; Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman find that the “criteria for deciding on what constitutes a nation are highly contested, involving complex issues relating to identity, culture, language, history, myth and
memory, and disputed claims to territory” (2) and Michael Ignatieff adds that “There is only so much that can be said about nationalism in general. It is not one thing in many disguises, but many things in many disguises” (9). Unlike a state, which concerns matters of governmental jurisdiction, and the powers held by a polity over a defined geographic area, a nation refers to the more abstract relations between people who envision themselves as connected through time, space, and an underlying set of values and principles, thereby highlighting the complex and recondite systems of meaning that combine to create the effect of national identity.

Yet it is despite, or perhaps due to, such evasiveness and impenetrability that nationalist discourses and identification continue to be of relevance, since it is this “chameleon quality of nationalism” that, for Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tétreault, permits its being “couched in multiple and, at times, competing organizational forms” (7). The myth of a post-national world that was popularized in the years following the Cold War, and which posited that the modern world had surmounted tribalism and divisive religious and racial thinking, has been replaced with what many have observed is a recent resurgence of nationalist sentiment. Ignatieff and others, such as Gopal Balakrishnan, have found that ethno-nationalist identification and cultural nationalist sentiment are particularly acute amongst those who feel their nation to be imperiled, thereby suggesting a raison d’être for the tendency towards and the durability of national identification in Canada. Encroached upon from without by weighty American cultural influences and threatened from within by unsettling ethnic conflicts, including those between French, English, and Native populations, Canadian nationalist values have frequently held centre stage within Canadian discourses and have been
championed by several influential cultural figures. Despite her depiction of Lesje’s and
Elizabeth’s deep-seated suspicions of nationalist alignment in Life Before Man, Atwood
herself has frequently voiced her support for, and allegiance to, the Canadian nation.44
Claiming Canada as her own, Atwood explains that “Refusing to acknowledge where you
come from … is an act of amputation: you may become free floating, a citizen of the
world … but only at the cost of arms, legs or heart” (“Travels Back” 113). Frequently
hailed as “the” voice of Canada, or as a personification of Canadian literature,45 Atwood
has been placed by critics and the Canadian public into a metonymic relationship with
Canada, and while she may at times reject the title of “nationalist” for fear of appearing
an ideologue or having her novels mistaken for sermons (“Defying” 63),46 she has been
widely influential in shaping the way that Canadians view themselves.

Atwood’s Survival (1972), a thematic guide aimed at prompting national self-
awareness, has arguably held the greatest impact of all her works on the developing
Canadian consciousness. Published during a period of burgeoning nationalism, Atwood’s
early work of cultural criticism extends from the premise that national life generates a
community ethos marked by specific beliefs, values, and characteristics, and that “the
central symbol for Canada … is undoubtedly Survival” (32), thereby encouraging
Canadians to imagine themselves in terms of their vulnerability and victimhood.
Reproducing and extending Canada’s symbolic heritage of “peace, order and good
government,” Survival further entrenches notions of Canadian peacefulness which, like
the Charter’s implied contrast with the American ideals of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit
of Happiness,” stand in direct opposition to the violence and the “taking in or
‘conquering’” (Survival 31) spirit native to the American genius. The essentially dialogic
nature of national identity that Atwood espouses suggests that gestures of self-recognition are based on difference, and that establishing national identification in a cultural vacuum is a difficult, if not impossible, task. The Hegelian dialectic of self and Other appears in Atwood’s criticism when she locates qualities oppositional to, and thus stimulative of, Canadian identity in the body of the national Other, and when she argues that “the reason for wanting to have a Canada is that you do not agree with some of the political choices that have been made by America and that you want to do it a different way” (“Where Were You” 90).

The proliferation of discourses depicting Canadians as innocents in contrast to Americans indicates how Canadians have established a sense of unity in imagining common ways of being. Such rhetoric surfaces in George Grant’s discussion of how Canadian reticence and “stodginess” have made Canada a society of greater “innocence than the people to the south” (70), and in Katherine Morrison’s comparison of Canadian and American cultural identities, in which she insists on a “traditional Canadian aversion to using [violence] to solve problems or even to achieve worthy objectives” (245). This belief in the processes of peacefulness has become an integral aspect of national identification and, in many ways, this mythology of non-violence and mutualism has come to underwrite other myths similarly central to the Canadian consciousness, such as the valuing of ethnic tolerance and multiculturalism. While Atwood’s criticism and interviews reveal her participation in disseminating conceptions of Canadian pacifism and the vulnerability this frequently entails when one holds “a will to lose” (Survival 35), her fictional writing complicates this uni-dimensional depiction of the Canadian ethos, and the binary structures upon which it is premised. Within such imaginative spaces,
Atwood highlights the reductiveness of imagining Canadian identity as a negative, or of defining Canada by what it is not, and explores the possibility that the differences marked by national borders are not eroding, but never really existed. In her unsettling of national mythologies, Atwood allows Canadians to see the violence they enact against others, and even against their fellow citizens, under a myriad of guises, producing victims that are as numerous as they are diverse. Such disruptions reveal how Canadians are not as inculpable as they at times envision themselves to be and suggest the necessity of keeping constructions of national identity open to re-negotiation.

Recognizing the instability of nations and the collective identities they contain is not only necessary before Canadians can perceive in themselves the violent potential they imagine in others, but it is also essential to a broader understanding of nationhood as a synthetic construct and a processual, rather than static, entity. Benedict Anderson, looking to print capitalism and shifting conceptions of time as the historic events contributing to the genesis of nationhood, in many ways revolutionized thinking about the nation when he conceived of it as an “imagined community,” given that “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15). In addressing the critical oversights of Anderson’s theory and exposing the exclusivity of race, class, and gender ideologies at the heart of such imagined communities, Tricia Cusack both continues and disrupts Anderson’s ideas, arguing that “national culture is in a sense a fiction, since the culture of any nation-state is likely to be diverse rather than unitary,” and further positing that “‘national culture’ is necessarily a ‘selective tradition’ and reflective of particular interests” (9). Yet this recognition of nationhood as an
imaginative construct, and thus acknowledgement of how national narratives are built around certain qualities and characteristics but not others, has been impeded by the rhetoric of authenticity often underlying nationalist discussions. Discourses of antiquity are frequently utilized by nationalists in an attempt to “place their own country in an ‘immemorial past’ where it’s [sic] arbitrariness cannot be questioned” (Brennan 45), and to present national identity as that which is natural, indisputable and self-evident. Moreover, this naturalization of national identity is compounded by use of mythic narratives to perpetuate a nation’s sense of itself, given that myths, according to Roland Barthes, “ha[ve] the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear external” (142), and by national emblems, such as flags, maps, uniforms, and national buildings, which work to suggest the fixity and immutability of national identity. In *Surfacing*, David’s drawing attention to the hailing of Canada as “The true north strong and free” (13) inadvertently reveals how many Canadians have similarly attempted to secure their nation’s legitimacy through discourses of authenticity, despite Canada’s relative youth as a polity.50

In moving beyond such myths of genuineness, one can begin to see the nation as endlessly emergent through process, and as a social construct of no less importance or influence for its continual reinvention. While national myths certainly possess an enduring quality that offers the illusion of permanence and stability, they are more broadly subject to gradual shifts and reconstructions that destabilize efforts to link a specific citizenry with inherent qualities or characteristics. According to Homi Bhabha, recognizing the fluidity and narrativity of national identities exposes how the nation-space is “in the process of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial
because they are *in medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image” (3). Bhabha’s positioning of the nation as an edifice of ideological ambivalence and his insistence on the contingency of established national meanings leave open to doubt those qualities upon which communities imagine their borders and belonging, and suggest the constant deferral of a definitive national identity. Myths of an immutable national consciousness and a unified national culture disallow us to see how the “‘other’ is never outside or beyond us” (Bhabha 4), and it is this collective blindness that is integral to nation-building. As both a means and a sign of shifts in national identification, literature and other cultural institutions often demonstrate the volatility of semiotic systems and insist on the need for individuals to look both *inter*-nationally and *intra*-nationally in order to recognize themselves. Moreover, while the continual reformulation of national narratives may suggest the need to discard static and clichéd representations of national identity, Atwood contends that such constructions are not wholly dispensable. Discussing her own efforts at re-fashioning Canadians’ self-understanding, Atwood suggests the need for such anachronistic national visions “before art or literature can play with them, that is, make variations on them, explore them more deeply, utilize their imaginative power … or turn them inside out. What art can’t do is ignore them altogether” (*Strange Things* 10).

In Atwood’s fiction, the violent woman reminds us of the impermanence of national identity by frequently challenging myths of vulnerability and other narratives central to the Canadian imaginary. As both an ex-centric and centric Canadian figure, the violent woman engages in acts of brutality that often render her a social pariah, yet such
acts simultaneously gesture towards the broader trends of violence central to Canadian society that are frequently masked by Canada’s national metanarratives. While Atwood’s use of the brutalizing woman as a vehicle for social critique and re-evaluation may appear an unconventional construction, this figuration is prefaced by the cultural imagination and the connections already established between the nation and violence, and between the nation and gender constructs. Emergent from this use of the brutalizing woman is not only the recognition of how tradition and cultural change are potentially connected, but also an awareness of the violent woman’s suitability as national soothsayer. As a figure variously denied and disclaimed by her society, the violent woman stands as the ideal subject to expose the similarly unacknowledged aspects of the national genius.

While Canadians have tended to imagine themselves as a peaceable people and as eschewing violent conflict in favour of a more passive, or moderate approach, there exist long-standing connections between the constructs of nationhood and violence. Cindy Ness’s reference to “the bloody task of nation building” (89), and Spencer and Wollman’s assertion that “competition, conflict and violence have been central to the emergence of nation-states from the outset” (45), testify to the advent of the nation-state in war, civil struggle, inter-denominational violence, and brutalities which often persist in the maintenance and expansion of national boundaries. The historical and conceptual affiliation between citizenship and military service, where one’s ties to the nation and the sacrifices and sufferings one makes in its name are mutually reinforcing, extends from the logic that the willingness to risk one’s life for one’s homeland is required in exchange for full membership within a polity and the promise of future protection and security. While violence is typically imagined as divisive and destructive, this link between
nationhood and violence suggests how common sufferings, like common victories, can incite a spirit of unity and solidarity, and how political brutality, like that of the violent woman, can perform as a sign that marks the extension and re-construction of national boundaries.

Similar to the extant conceptual frameworks linking nationhood and violence, cultural constructions connecting the nation to gender help readers to situate Atwood’s use of the violent woman in re-evaluating national narratives. While the individual has frequently been employed by Atwood and others to illuminate the nation and vice-versa, where the individual concretizes the abstraction of nationhood and the nation illuminates and projects subjective experience, the consciousness of the nation has more specifically been articulated through the female gender. E.J. Pratt’s “Towards the Last Spike” (1952), Leonard Cohen’s Beautiful Losers (1966) and Susan Swan’s The Biggest Modern Woman of the World (1983) exemplify the continued use of the female figure to examine Canada and its geography in Canadian literature. Yet it is the numerous American feminists assuming that nationalism is an “all patriarchal, male-dominated boys’ [game]” (“Evading” 139) that have particularly piqued Atwood’s attention, as well as Western feminists in general, who have frequently appraised women’s wide-spread conscription for the reproduction of the nation and its borders, rather than the powerful potential for subversion this implies. While Cusack argues that women are relegated “to symbolic rather than active roles in the polity” (2), where women’s designation as national emblems allows them to perform in the mythology of nationhood, but not in its everyday lived experience, others, including Nira Yuval-Davis, insist on the agency of women within the nation-state. In her influential and insightful writings on the gendering
of the nation, Yuval-Davis outlines the primary ways in which women actively participate in the development and maintenance of the nation through their roles in the military, the reproduction of citizens, ideology, and national boundaries, and in performing as “symbols of national ‘essence’” (116). Yet even for Yuval-Davis, larger patriarchal forces govern such reproductive roles for women, and power is only granted to women as “social power” to “exert control over other women who might be constructed as ‘deviants’” (37). In other words, while Yuval-Davis draws upon this latter point to suggest how “women are not just passive victims” (37) within national frames, her observation of women’s policing for the inappropriate behaviours of other women indicates how, for some, women’s subversion is always already contained within the larger dictates of patriarchal standards of gendered behaviours.

Forcing recognition of the need to see beyond women’s passive and circumscribed roles within the nation, Atwood’s fictional rendering of the violent woman maintains the concept of women as variable reproducers of the nation, but further recognizes the violent woman’s capacity for insubordination within this role. Contrasting with Walter Seymour Allward’s statue of Mother Canada in the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France, which personifies Canada as a young mother mourning the loss of her fallen sons and thus reiterates myths of Canada’s vulnerability and victimhood, are the numerous cultural artifacts of the violent woman that have been produced in various countries over the past two centuries in an effort to articulate national identity. Such national iconographies, however, typically display the violent woman as a sword-wielding figure who perpetuates traditional national themes, such as liberty, justice and the victorious spirit of the nation, rather than one who exposes the less exalted realities
that such themes belie. Diverging from this convention of aligning the bellicose woman
with popular national narratives, Atwood’s violent women are agents of both the
*reproduction* and *reconstruction* of the national consciousness. More precisely, what
Atwood’s violent women, as modern mythographers, reproduce and disseminate is an
unsettling re-conception of Canada’s various mythologies, including the understanding of
Canadians as figures of vulnerability and passivity. Resisting the traditional relegation of
female deviancy to the margins of literary narratives, Atwood’s violent women frequently
manipulate the role of woman as stalwart gate-keeper of the nation’s ethos by admitting
unsettling images into the national consciousness, thus enabling a recognition of the less
venerable aspects of both the Canadian genius, and of women themselves.

As one of Atwood’s earliest and most widely read works of fiction, *Surfacing* has
accumulated much scholarly attention, a significant proportion of which views the
narrative as contributing to the development of a distinctive national identity. The
publication of the novel in the early seventies during an era of centennial fervour and in
the same year as *Survival* has prompted many critics to read *Surfacing* as a treatise that
reflects Atwood’s early critical work in urging the self-consciousness of Canadians, and
inciting them to acknowledge the heritage of victimhood that is distinctly their own.
Coral Ann Howells posits this connection between the two texts in suggesting how they
“exist in a symbiotic relationship for although the novel was written first, it was through
writing it that Atwood realised certain common themes that her fiction shared with other
Canadian writing, and *Survival* in turn shows Atwood creating the critical context in
which to read her own fiction” (*Margaret Atwood* 39). Yet such endeavors to see the
two works as congruous narratives overlook the manner in which the novel tentatively
aligns with, but more broadly undermines, the critical position Atwood develops in *Survival* concerning Canadians’ relative innocence and the nation’s “superabundance of victims” (39), thereby contributing to, rather than solving, the cultural unrest of the period, constructing and destabilizing the Canadian signature in the same narrative gesture. While many critics have endeavoured to question the validity, accuracy and scope of *Survival*, little has been said of this disjunctive and uneasy relationship between the “victim theme” (111) of *Survival*, which includes Atwood’s model of the four “Basic Victim Positions,” and the construction of Canadian female violence in *Surfacing*. Moreover, there appears little acknowledgement of the ways in which Atwood’s critical work—which she admits was conceived as a “hundred-page leaflet squeezed from [her] lecture notes” (“After Survival” 133)—is reductive in its discussion of issues that are more adequately and thoughtfully explored in her novel. By allowing Canadian vulnerability and Canadian violence to share centre stage, this discussion makes apparent that what “surfaces” in the novel is the ambivalent nature of the Canadian genius, and the need to seek an alternative third position that moves beyond frameworks of violence.

Appraised by Atwood as a type of Canadian ghost story (Gibson 29), *Surfacing* shifts between the present experiences and indeterminate memories of a young and unnamed first-person narrator who is returning to the Quebec wilderness of her youth in order to uncover the reason for her father’s recent disappearance, which we later learn is due to his drowning in the lake while searching for Native rock paintings. The narrator, accompanied by her lover Joe, and her friends Anna and David, settles into her father’s recently abandoned cabin before beginning her search, only to discover that what she is
really seeking is an understanding of her own elusive and tenuously held past. However, the narrator’s search for identity is never exclusively a pursuit of self-knowledge, but rather, appears at times as her search for a definitive Canadian identity. Numerous critics, such as June Schlueter, have noted the ways in which the narrator remains in dialogue with the nation, imagining her as a revealing figure who makes evident the ways in which Canadians are rendered “vulnerable, consumable, and oppressed” (2). Yet it is only in looking beyond this framework of victimhood that one is enabled to see how the narrator’s recognition of her violent tendencies prompts her awareness of the violence that similarly mars Canada and its historic past. As a harbinger offering a new understanding of Canada and the ghosts it conceals, the narrator catalyzes a re-thinking of the Canadian imaginary, and illuminates how the (re-)emergence of national identity occurs continually in the everyday.

Exemplifying Atwood’s assertion in *Survival* that the organizing sentiments of the Canadian mythos are the feelings of “hanging on, staying alive,” and of an “intolerable anxiety” (33) resultant from the perception of ubiquitous threat, the narrator of *Surfacing* is a figure multiply marked by her vulnerability, particularly as a Canadian and as a woman. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator’s notice of the burned out “R” in a sign that resultantly reads “the oyal” (7) on the main street of a small Quebec town gestures towards the rapidly fading imperial presence in Canada, and the simultaneous disappearance of a sense of protection under a larger and more established governing body. Shortly after viewing this symbolic reminder of Canada’s susceptibility, the narrator registers her general feeling of anxiety and her compulsion to “keep [her] outside hand on the door” (8). In this instance, the narrator’s feelings of vulnerability while
traveling on an uncertain road in an unreliable vehicle with untrustworthy fellow
passengers are conflated with, yet paradoxically help to illuminate, her skepticism and
sense of defencelessness as a citizen in a newly postimperial nation. In other words, the
narrator recognizes that a nation’s independence from one imperial power can be a
prelude to the attacks of others. Yet such fears of national vulnerability are nothing new
to the narrator. As a child during World War II, the narrator anticipates her later fears of
foreign invasion by creatively envisioning Hitler as “the great evil, many-tentacled,
ancient and indestructible as the Devil” (139), further imagining his influence to reach
her through her brother’s comic books and the swastikas in his scrapbook. The
considerable impact of this perceived threat on the narrator as a child is similarly
reflected in her imaginative play with her brother, in which they would wrap their feet in
blankets, pretending that “the Germans shot [them] off” (8).68

Years later, the narrator recalibrates the source of national threat in sensing
Canada’s vulnerability to an invasion by Americans, who she initially envisions as a
“disease… spreading up from the south” (7) and later synecdochically imagines through
Bill Malmstrom, who admits to having his eye on her father’s land “for quite some time”
(102). While vulnerability has been recognized as a constituent element of national
independence and an ineluctable aspect of citizenship, Shannon Hengen notes that
vulnerability in Surfacing is presented as “truer somehow to the Canadian than to the
American mythos” (Margaret 61), resulting in the appearance of Americans having
power and Canadians being devoid of it. The vulnerability that the narrator repeatedly
recognizes in herself as a Canadian reiterates a fundamental assertion of Survival that
“Canada as a whole is a victim” (35). Yet the narrator proceeds to complicate this claim
in her early, albeit unsustainable, conception of violence as that which firmly establishes Canadian identity through its absence. Similar to Atwood’s observation that “in none of our acts… are we passive” (Survival 246), the narrator early on suggests that victimhood is not a form of passivity, but a gesture of national identification that distinguishes her from others and that remains untainted with the brutality of the Other.

Extending her victim status to her identity as a woman, the narrator further suggests that Canadian women face an increased risk of becoming victims, given the multiple vulnerabilities encoded by their nationality and gender. Recollecting her previous role as a vessel for her former lover’s child, the narrator regards her possession of a womb as a weakness that permitted her ex-lover to impose upon her an unwanted pregnancy: “all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself” (37). The narrator’s perception of her unwanted fetus as cannibalistically feeding “on [her]” reveals how she had registered the betrayal not only of her body and her lover, but also of her unborn child, indicating the similitude between the narrator, who feels preyed upon from all directions and who suffers from what Alice Palumbo identifies as an “unvoiced, but lurking, anxiety” (75), and Atwood’s Canadian subject in Survival, who is faced with omnipresent perils. It is only in retrospect that the narrator recognizes the irony of thinking that answering “‘A lady’ or ‘A mother’” (97) would be a “safe” response to the question of what she wanted to be when she grew up. Yet the narrator’s obstinate return to images of her female victimization and to the threats impressed upon Canadians, and thus her repeated identification with the second victim position which indicates her victimization by socio-political forces beyond her control, betrays her
attraction to vulnerability as a paradoxical position of ascendancy. Atwood’s insight that “People can be morally superior when they are in a position of relative powerlessness” (“Just Looking” 122) and the narrator’s belief that “failure … has a kind of purity” (62) offer a rationale for the narrator’s attraction to feelings of impotence. The profound reversals implied by this reasoning signal the multidimensionality of, and the advantages potentially offered through, Canadian, female, and other positions of vulnerability. However, Atwood’s additional casting of doubt on the a priori inculpability of women, and more broadly on the notion of Canada as a “goody-goody land of idealists” (“Just Looking” 122), signals the complexity and culpability that lies beneath the surface of gender conventions and national narratives.

Since her childhood, the narrator has imagined the violent Other as slowly encroaching, envisioning “the great evil” to migrate from Hitler’s Germany to contemporary America. Yet her later recognition that violence is not approaching, but already present in her, forces her to acknowledge that her vulnerability is co-existent with her own violent potential and incites an important realization: that the dichotomies of good and evil rarely exist in their unadulterated forms in individuals or in nations. Further, the narrator’s growing awareness of her violent capacities marks the departure of Surfacing from the theoretical premise of Survival, and signals how the novel renders inadequate “the ever-present victim motif” (Survival 95) proposed by the criticism, including the four victim positions that underestimate Canadians’ potential for violence. The narrator’s initial distancing from, and hostility towards, brutalizing agents and cultures dramatize how “The Other is frequently a dumping-ground for anxieties, or a way of unloading [one’s] moral responsibilities” (Strange Things 47), where the
characteristics that the narrator most fears and abhors in others are uncannily reflective of characteristics she sees in herself and in her fellow Canadians. This unsettling recognition of culpability forces a reconstruction of the Canadian mythos of vulnerability and exposes the deep ambivalence of the Canadian signature. National differences imagined to distinguish between political bodies are used in *Survival* to offer citizens a unified and cogent national narrative, yet such differences are to a large extent revealed as imaginative constructs fabricated to evoke a false sense of unanimity and an allegiance to a distinctive polity. Moreover, the Canadian potential for brutality indicates the capacity for violence to emerge from unexpected entities, and the similarities between individuals and nations that are frequently masked by powerful narratives of gender and nationhood.

Opposing traditional constructions of violence that configure it as the assailing of one human on the mentality or physicality of another, the narrator’s violence frequently takes the form of an attack on nature. Primarily insisting on the value of the natural world in and of itself, *Surfacing* further challenges Atwood’s observation in *Survival* that while it is possible to recognize animals on their own terms, an animal is rarely “liked or disliked for itself alone; it is chosen for its symbolic anthropomorphic values” (79). The novel’s insistence on the need to recognize animals outside of their human resemblances and the frailty of non-human life reveals its layered stance towards victimhood, wherein human and non-human life forms are portrayed as vulnerable, and violence is not exclusively that which is enacted against sentient objects or materials. In this light, the narrator’s childhood decision to throw leeches into the campfire, from which they would “writhe out and crawl painfully, coated with ashes and pine needles, back towards the lake” (142), and her later uprooting of weeds that “resisted, holding on or taking clumps
of soil out with them or breaking their stems,” and that left “green … weed blood” (83) on her hands, can be viewed as acts of violence against nature. Like the mutilated heron, which stands most powerfully as a testament to the potential victimhood of nature, the animals and vegetation that the narrator variously annihilates suggest how violence against the natural world is no longer a matter of survival or indifference, but a manifestation of the human desire to inflict torture and suffering, and the willingness to end life in order to satisfy one’s own appetite for destruction. With a few exceptions, the general failure of Atwood scholars to locate the destruction of the natural world within frameworks of violence has limited criticism to an examination of nature as an insensate entity, or as a multivalent metaphor for human experience. Similarly, it has prevented critical analyses from moving beyond the acts of violence themselves in order to speculate on the communicative intent behind such behaviours.

Proclaiming the dangers inherent in “other people telling [her] what [she] felt” (78) and of externally or historically-imposed constructions of her identity, including those imposed through discourses of nationhood and gender, the narrator describes her destruction of nature as violence in an effort to avow her blameworthiness for the atrocities she had exclusively associated with others. While similar violations against nature may have been previously committed by the narrator, it is her recognition of such acts as violence that indicates her “opt[ing] for life and responsibility” (Hutcheon “From Poetic” 29) for both the destruction of individual life forms and the endangerment of the ecosystem as a whole. More broadly, the narrator’s descriptions of her violence against nature draw attention to Canadians’ participation in the natural ruination that has widely been attributed to Americans’ behaviors and lifestyles. While Canadian readers are led to
believe that stories of “Senseless killing” and of horrific loon chases in powerboats that continue “until [the loon] drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades” (131) are distinctively American, the narrator’s admittedly more subtle, yet nonetheless similar, acts of violence bring Canadians into chilling alignment with their southern neighbors. Here, national differences are not of type, but of degree. The willed forgetfulness of Canadians to what David identifies as the founding of Canada “on the bodies of dead animals” (43), such as beaver, seals and fish, and their oversight of how Canadian development has left “rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening” (15), has hitherto permitted Canadians to overlook how violence coincides with the birth of their nation and is woven throughout Canada’s past and present. The selective processes that characterize memory and national self-consciousness indicate how incomplete narratives have shaped the national genius. Given that the female body has traditionally been utilized as a signifier of nationhood, and the boundaries of this body a variable marker of the safety and security of the nation, the destabilization of the narrator’s bodily margins on account of her emaciation following her rejection of food, her shedding of her “false body” (191), and her consequent attempts to grow fur, function as a portent of this shift in Canada’s mythos, registering on a symbolic level the challenge Canadian violence poses to the national consciousness.

While violations against the natural environment and its inhabitants stress the importance of expanding notions of vulnerability and of recognizing the Canadian culpability that lies beyond myths of the nation’s “collective victim[hood]” (Survival 111), such abuses simultaneously operate in a more traditional manner as figurative devices that suggest the violence humans enact upon one another. Functioning as a
conceptual gateway that enables her to recognize her potential to enact violence against human bodies, the narrator’s use of simile in describing her brutality against animal bodies indicates her mindfulness of how, in certain capacities, “[animals] are substitute people” (150). After impaling a frog onto David’s fishing lure and listening to its audible protestations, the narrator watches as the lure sinks and the “frog goes down through the water, kicking like a man” (68). While the simile drawn here may initially appear isolated or inappreciable, the narrator’s later perception of the dead heron as “strung … up like a lynch victim” (125) signals her growing awareness that “Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first” (130).

Increasingly aware of her brutalizing capacities, the narrator can no longer assume the alterity of violence, making the painful discovery of her capacity to inflict harm on various non-sentient and sentient surfaces, including those of humans. Recollecting the hard truth of her abortion that she had hitherto denied incites her to envision that this termination paradoxically birthed in her the capacity to harm others. In this sense, the narrator’s pregnancy performs dually as an event that in one instance reinforces the propositions of Survival concerning the ubiquity of threat, yet in another signals a movement beyond such codes of vulnerability: “it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer” (155). Once again, the narrator’s tendency to imagine violence against nature prior to acknowledging her potential for violence against humans is made evident through her analogy of her fetus as a defenceless animal, yet her admission of guilt is ultimately partial and in denial of her earlier enactments of violence against humans, real or otherwise.
In imagining her abortion as the origin of her brutality, the narrator overlooks her childhood play with her brother in which they “killed other people besides Hitler” and “gnawed the fingers, feet and nose off [their] least favorite doll, ripped her cloth body open and pulled out the stuffing … [and] threw her into the lake” (140). According to Marie-Françoise Guédon, such acts indicate how “the [narrator’s] return to childhood is not the way to redemption” (102). Given the narrator’s early exposure to violence against the human form, later indications of her capacity for brutality present themselves without surprise. While seeking the source of her father’s drawings, the narrator wishes “evil” on her fellow campers who she presumes are American by praying for events which will leave them stranded in the lake and that will “Let them suffer … burn them, rip them open” (133), revealing how the narrator’s adult impulses towards violence are influenced by her early practices. Before learning that the “American” campers are in fact Torontonians, the narrator is similarly enraged by one of the men’s suspected involvement in the death of the heron, and avows her compulsion to “swing the paddle sideways, blade into his head: his eyes would blossom outwards, his skull shatter like an egg” (138).

That the narrator repeatedly recollects her father’s teachings concerning the legitimacy and even rationality of “killing” certain things, such as “enemies and food” (140), further indicates her later adherence to her childhood lessons and suggests that she is motivated in her atrocious imaginings by a spirit of environmental and national defence. Yet her perceived need to safeguard her country fails to remain constant, and is destabilized by her recognition of Canada’s on-going history of violence; as with the narrator’s destruction of nature, her admission of her proclivity for enacting harm against
humans incites her to look more broadly to recognize Canada’s similar potentiality. In these moments of concession, the horrific brutalities enacted on Canadian soil are recalled, alongside the various ways in which these acts of violence have been effaced by both conceptions of national vulnerability that Atwood fosters through her criticism, and to a lesser extent by Atwood’s inconsistency in Survival in connecting human casualties in Canadian literature with those of Canada’s history. In particular, the novel’s setting in Quebec augments David’s observation that Canada is founded on violence by revealing traces of English Canada’s historic brutalities against the French, and of the hostility that continues between them. The vandalized border sign that the group passes in entering Quebec, which reads “BEINVENUE on one side and WELCOME on the other” and “has bullet holes in it” (11), can be read as a palimpsestic cultural marker that carries conflicting official and unofficial messages, and that indicates the necessity of searching within Canadian national borders to determine Canada’s relationship to violence, rather than exclusively looking beyond them. In later confessing that she was raised knowing very little about “what the villagers thought or talked about, [she] was so shut off from them” (58), the narrator highlights English Canada’s disavowal of responsibility for its oppressions of the Québécois, and what Carole Gerson argues is the English-Canadian perception of Quebec as “both ‘us’ and ‘not us’.” Gerson’s further characterization of Quebec as a “place where the narrator strips away … false surfaces” helps to illuminates how Atwood’s use of the Quebec setting extends from a logic similar to that which informs her use of the violent woman. As an insider/outsider province, Quebec occupies an advantaged position to expose other
facets of Canadian identity, such as its marred and bloody past, that have been similarly
denied and abnegated.

There are, of course, others beyond the Québécois whose suffering has been
overlooked due to English-Canada’s attempt to cultivate “a national myth which
emphasizes nonviolence even at the expense of historical truth” (Djwa “Deep Caves”
178). While seeking the Native rock paintings that had captivated her father, the narrator
envisages her father’s lineage extending from the “original ones, the first explorers,
leaving behind them their sign, word” (136). Yet this reference to Natives as the “original
ones” establishes their opposition to later intruders,84 disrupting what appears a fluid
historical connection between the narrator’s father and the land’s earlier inhabitants by
calling to mind what Himani Bannerji terms Canada’s “colonial and imperialist nature
and aspirations” (80). Bannerji has further said of *Surfacing* that it “follows a literary and
artistic tradition already in place” in which “indigenous peoples are either not there or are
one with the primal, non-human forces of nature” (80). However, given the narrator’s
recollection of how, as a child, there were very few Natives “on the lake even then, the
government had put them somewhere else, corralled them” (92),85 and her interpretations
of the Canadian penny as displaying “leaves on one side and a [red] man’s head chopped
off at the neck on the reverse” (91),86 it is perhaps more accurate to read the general
absence of living Native characters as a critique of Canada’s oppositional politics and its
brutal history of colonialism and erasure. In other words, what Bannerji in her critique
fails to address is the potential for textual absence to argue on the behalf of the absent,
and the possibility that the poignant omission of living Natives in *Surfacing* is an attempt
to draw attention to, rather than overlook, the atrocities endured by indigenous populations.

Seeking a third position as *deus ex machina* that would offer an alternative to traditions of violence and vulnerability, the narrator attempts to discover a way to live in harmony with her human and non-human surroundings and to see beyond the binary options she had previously imagined: “To immerse oneself, join in the war, or to be destroyed. Though there ought to be other choices” (203). Given Atwood’s sense that the Canadian “genius is for compromise” (“Using Other People’s” 223), this pursuit of equilibrium through alternative positioning reveals how the narrator’s national identification persists despite her unsettling of the Canadian mythos, and how she can be loyal to the nation while fighting within it for rectification and transformation. The narrator’s exclusive reliance towards the end on people and constructs evincing the qualities of process and dynamism suggests that her conception of balance is not defined as a place one achieves, but a strategy of living perhaps best exemplified by Paul and Madame, whose Québécois identity has forced them to practice cultural negotiations as a survival strategy. Yet there has been little critical evaluation of the untenability of this third option as a viable solution. Elsewhere, Atwood explains the impossibility of having a “character who is fully liberated … in a society which is not. Unless we make that person a mystic and withdraw them from the society” (“The Empress” 189). But for the narrator, “withdrawing is no longer possible” (206). The narrator’s uncertainty at the novel’s close intimates a deferral of the enlightenment and clarity traditionally accompanying the achievement of a harmonious life, and her notice that there is “No total
salvation, resurrection” (204) suggests that she has not merely pursued the wrong solution, but that there are no solutions to be had.

While Frank Davey argues that Atwood sacrifices “depth of characterization” in \textit{Surfacing} in order to espouse the “profound unnaturalness of … human exploitation” (\textit{From There} 34), it is perhaps more discriminating to assert Atwood’s construction of individual wrongdoings and violence as behaviours which are \textit{natural}, essentially human, and which “[are] in us too” (\textit{Surfacing} 142). Observing how “the average” human life is linked to a “needless cruelty” (203), the narrator reluctantly acknowledges the impossibility of transcending the deeply human codes of violence and vulnerability, gradually replacing the rhetoric of violence as evil with an understanding of violence as mortal, and explaining that “The trouble some people have being German … I have being human” (141). From this, it becomes clear that position four of Atwood’s victim theory—which proposes the “\textit{creative non-victim}” (\textit{Survival} 38) mentality as the most ethical and liberating response to victimization—is an unachievable ideal and a misrecognition of the potential for violence, and, \textit{ipso facto}, the susceptibility to harm, at the center of the human condition. In her later critical writing, Atwood concedes that what renders us “all-too-human” is our “potentially hard and icy and monstrous … hearts” (\textit{Strange Things} 88). Framed by such admissions, the novel’s final vision becomes simultaneously optimistic and realistic, nationalistic and humanistic, and brutality is recognized as indelibly tied to the ways of human being. Moreover, while the narrator’s violence forces a re-evaluation of the victimhood central to both the Canadian mythos and \textit{Survival} by exposing Canada’s participation in, and collaboration with, violence, this same vulnerability remains ineffaceable by the end of the narrative, given what Catherine
Rainwater identifies as humanity’s “universally murderous traits” (17). If the narrator’s transcendent third option is, by the novel’s end, a qualified hope and more an idealistic goal than an immediate possibility, it has nonetheless provoked recognition of the multidimensionality of Canadians, whether they like it or not, and indeed of humankind.

***

In her short story “The Man From Mars,” Atwood extends her earlier harnessing of the disruptive potential of female brutality, highlighting Christine’s inclinations towards violence as a means of re-evaluating not only Canada’s vulnerability, but also the political virtue of multiculturalism elemental to the Canadian identity. Collected in Dancing Girls (1977), which is broadly concerned with issues of alterity and alienation, “The Man From Mars” marks a shift in national discourses that, according to Howells, indicates a “slippage in the bedrock” of English-Canadian definitions of national identity and a national culture (Margaret Atwood 51) since the publication of Surfacing. Due to the insistence of various ethnic minorities on their right to participate in the (re)construction of national myths to reflect Canada’s diversity, the national imaginary has increasingly gravitated towards frameworks of multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism. Yet Christine’s aggressive impulses towards an unnamed Asian immigrant dramatize how the behaviors of Canadians in the late 1970s lagged behind such diplomatic advances, and illuminate Carl James’s observation that “the opportunities and tolerance that the multicultural policy and legislation promise” have been slow to “take root in many parts of the country” (18). Gesturing towards broader Canadian trends of intolerance and ignorance, Christine’s brutality suggests that many long-standing societal practices and discriminations have not been reformed by political policy innovations and
further indicates how Canada’s national imaginary misaligns with the de facto treatment of ethnic individuals in Canada. Moreover, Atwood’s reconstruction of the nation’s master narratives through the disquieting figure of the violent woman suggests that, as with her earlier renderings, what she has to communicate is a message that few will be comforted to hear.

Linda Hutcheon has written of multiculturalism as a doctrine that “is written into our consciousness of what it means to be Canadian,” recognizing that while Canada has always in some capacity negotiated cultural tensions and benefited from cultural richness, the multicultural elements of Canada are now “an undeniable reality” (“A Spell” 5, 2). Following Canada’s Official Languages Act in 1969, which acknowledged both French and English as Canada’s official languages, Pierre Elliott Trudeau on October 8th 1971 announced to the House of Commons a “Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework” which marked Canada as the first country to legislate an official multiculturalism policy. This measure was later reinforced by Bill C-93, the Canadian Multicultural Act, in July of 1988, which further politicized “tolerance” and confirmed cultural pluralism as an important component of Canada’s national project. Coincident with such political reforms and indelibly linked to them were changes in Canada’s immigration policy that facilitated non-European immigration into Canada. While Canadian immigrants, prior to 1970, were predominantly individuals from the many cultures of Europe, the government’s movement to eliminate racial discrimination in immigration regulations in the late 1960s resulted in a dramatic increase in visible minority populations in Canada over the next thirty years. The publication of “The Man From Mars” in 1977 amidst such political reform is reflected in its exploration of
society’s alignment with pluralist measures, and particularly in its questioning of whether or not visible ethnic difference has really ceased to be a challenge to the Canadian identity and become integral to it. While critics such as Karen Stein argue that Atwood “avoids political solutions because she views them as part of the problem” and therefore seeks resolutions that are “personal” (Margaret 6), Atwood’s assessment of shifts in individual behavior alongside political reform suggests her awareness of the interconnections between the personal and the political. Aligning with the Hobsbawmian notion that societal change must be enacted from both above and below, “The Man From Mars” implies Atwood’s sense that legislative reform must coincide with changes in individual practices for real societal transformation to take place.

Extending political debate to the literary sphere, “The Man From Mars” gauges the extent to which policies of multiculturalism and the liberalization of immigration laws have altered English Canada’s acceptance of immigrants, and evaluates whether or not diplomatic shifts are accompanied by changes in behavior. Tracking Christine’s variable responses to the recent appearance of a young Asian man of unspecified origins on her university campus, the narrative raises questions of ethnic tolerance as the persistent young man develops an unexplained attachment to Christine and begins to pursue her in both private and public spaces. Initially, Christine extends to him a superficial benevolence through her efforts to do “her duty” (15) and accommodate his arrival to her school. To the extent that Christine feels she has done “[her] bit for internationalism” (26) by feigning kindness to the young man, she indicates her desire to welcome the stranger and her intentions to avoid close relations with him. Yet Christine’s ideal of a polite and perfunctory relationship with the young man is soon rendered impossible when
she perceives his continued efforts to befriend her as threatening. That she soon imagines the need to physically defend herself around the young man, and feels “weaponless” (16) without her tennis racquet, further identifies the ephemeral nature of her acceptance of the ethnic Other. Despite her acknowledgement of her superior physical strength (17), Christine repeatedly envisions the “razors, knives, guns” (30) the young man might potentially use against her and superimposes a violent persona onto an ostensibly harmless young man. In envisioning herself as the victim of an ethnic Other, Christine not only mistakes her admirer’s vulnerability for her own, but further reveals how self versus Other distinctions can potentially lead to inter-ethnic conflict and act as “subliminal triggers of violence against the enemy-other” (Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault 16).

If Christine is depicted as imperiled on account of her associations with her admirer and entrapped within a “nightmare as she … brood[s] over blood-drenched visions of assault and murder” (Thompson 112), the unfolding of events instantiate a reversal of this dynamic by exposing Christine’s violent potential; Charlotte Sturgess similarly observes that “the victim is not female, but the immigrant as ‘other’” (89). While Christine is right to observe that, in reality, “there was nothing [the young man] could do to her” (16), her “vicious urge” (20) while conversing with him on the phone, and her strong inclinations to shake and hit him while in his presence (28), suggest that the inverse is not necessarily true. Offering a corrective to Greta’s assumption in “Rape Fantasies” that Canada is a place of safety and asylum (Dancing 95) and to Trudeau’s optimistic but ultimately misguided belief that Canadians are “the trustees of reasonableness, not violence” (qtd. in Frank et al. 52), Christine’s violent impulses and
her obsessive reading of the similar potential for brutality in her admirer attest to how many Canadians are complicit in a culture of violence that runs just beneath the surface of Canadian society. Moreover, the ultimate ineffectiveness of Christine’s physical brutality, signaled by her failure to act on her urges, does not imply her rejection of violent tactics, but rather the intangibility of her principle target: the young man’s ineffaceable alterity. Notwithstanding this impalpability, however, the threat of the man’s otherness appears particularly acute to Christine because it presents itself within and around the privileged spaces of her university and her stately family home, and coincides with the young man’s lonely shadowing of Christine, where this behavior further links him to images of deviancy and paradoxically “antisocial” gestures. To the extent that Christine regards her admirer as a stock/stalker figure, she is enabled to distance herself from him, given her increasing perception of herself as an embodiment of the pursued woman, in multiple ways indicating how “the power of convention transforms the body” (Boynton) and works to separate disparate bodies from one another.

In attempting to understand Christine’s pointed hostility and her desire to harm her new acquaintance, it is also useful to draw on Atwood’s suggestion that “there’s no way of accounting for the atrocities that people perform on other people except by the “Martian” factor, the failure to see one’s victims as fully human” (“Dancing” 76). This explanation of how viewing an individual as non-human can act as a motivation to, and justification for, violence is made manifest when Christine not only refuses to acknowledge her admirer’s name (15), but also imagines that he has the abilities to “walk through walls” and to “be everywhere at once” (31). Similar to the narrator of Surfacing in her perception of Americans as men with “Raygun fishing rods, faces impermeable as
space-suit helmets … guilt glittered on them like tinfoil” (130), Christine envisions her acquaintance’s alien status when she imagines that his native country is as “remote from her as another planet” (35), an observation reflected in the title of the narrative.97

Instantiating Atwood’s observation that “we all have a way of dehumanizing anything which is strange or exotic to us” (“Dancing” 76), such descriptions suggest that the ethnic alterity Christine perceives in the young man connotes such a radical otherness that it encourages her to abstract his human qualities and to perform violence on that which remains. What Christine fails to notice, or admit, throughout this process is her likeness to the young man, and the ways in which her heavy set frame, and her “Obsessively” (36) seeking details of the young man’s whereabouts after his disappearance, similarly render her a socially marginal figure. It is only in the closing lines that Christine glimpses this resemblance in imagining that her admirer, upon returning to his home country, is likely to have become “something in the background, like herself” (37).

Contrary to many critics’ understanding that “violence represents the breakdown of meaning, the advent of the irrational” (Whitehead 40), Christine’s early inclinations towards violence and the ethnic intolerance it conveys gesture towards broader patterns of behavior in her society and point out the necessity of continually (re)constructing the terms of Canadian identity. In this sense, the boundaries between disruption and restoration are revealed as ambiguous, and the violence of destruction becomes enmeshed with the violence of regeneration. Exemplifying this paradox, Christine’s violence does not so much effect the disintegration or collapse of the national imaginary as signal the need to re-evaluate the terms upon which it is premised, ultimately forcing a re-consideration of Canada’s vulnerability and exposing the tokenism and hostility of
English-Canadians in response to increasing ethnic diversity. While critics such as Hutcheon have remarked Canada’s deep roots in pluralist ways of thinking, Christine’s brutality intimates how Canadians face much difficulty, and are often at odds with themselves, in attempting to actualize such ideologies. Perhaps above all else, Christine’s initial response to the Asian man raises the question of whether a nation characterized by diversity can simultaneously be a nation without conflict.

Despite Trudeau’s aspirations for multiculturalism to be embraced by all Canadians on a personal level, Christine registers the failure of this vision and the ways in which Canada’s legislative reforms have not been met with similar changes in the everyday practices of individual Canadians. Critical evaluations of “The Man From Mars” have tended to privilege Atwood’s “adroit, sly comic gift” (Tyler), yet typically overlooked is the biting critique of Canadian society the narrative provides by showcasing the veiled intolerance of Canadians in their encounters with visible ethnic difference. The hypocrisy behind what Ray Conlogue terms Canada’s “sad pantomime of multiculturalism” (18) is perhaps best exemplified by the false tolerance repeatedly demonstrated by numerous Canadians towards ethnicity, where even the members of Christine’s United Nations Club are reluctant to “represent the Egyptian delegation at the Mock Assembly” since “nobody wanted to be the Arabs” (14). The desultory acceptance of cultural diversity amongst Christine’s peers reveals that while Canadians distinguish themselves through claims of offering a sovereign space for people of all origins, their everyday behaviors frequently undermine such assertions, and that ostensibly “Canadian” qualities can survive in the national imaginary irrespective of the de facto practices of Canadians. Further exemplifying the disparity between Canada’s ideals and its flawed
reality is Christine’s mother, who “pride[s] herself on her tolerance” (22), yet perpetuates
dangerous assumptions about the sexuality of dark-skinned women in presuming the
promiscuousness of her West Indies “girl,” Elvira (22). Refusing to see beyond the
consummate otherness and illegibility she identifies in her daughter’s new acquaintance,
Christine’s mother additionally insists that “you could never tell” whether foreigners are
“insane or not because their ways [are] so different” (32). In moments such as these,
tolerance is exposed as a virtue that is frequently Janus-faced, where patience and
leniency with otherness is often accompanied by an insistence on maintaining discourses
of difference, and the refusal to judge other cultures is annexed with presumptions of
one’s own morality and righteousness.

Atwood’s use of Christine to signal broader social trends is made further evident by the manner in
which Christine dramatizes Canadians’ tendency to regard an ineffaceable alterity at the
heart of ethnicity and to display hostility in response to this suggestion of difference; in
this sense, the real threat lies not in the presence of otherness, but in those who label and
react to visible minorities as “Others.” The racist assumptions underlying the policeman’s
message to Christine that the Asian man’s “kind don’t hurt you … They just kill you”
(32) indicates the institutionalized prejudice and the broader discriminatory surveillance
of visible minorities in Canada. When Christine finally leads the authorities to the capture
of her admirer, his familiarity with them is made evident by the fact that “He seemed to
know perfectly well who they were and what they wanted” (33). Here, the young man’s
response implies that we should be alarmed not by his behaviors, but by the ease with
which we accept Christine’s assessment of danger in her relations with him, and the lack
of hesitation demonstrated by the police in their reading of him as a homicidal threat. The
narrative sustains this image of the Asian man as victim of broader cultural hostility by further identifying the “intolerable strain” that he endures “just from being in this country” (35) and that wracks his body, leaving him “deteriorated. He was, if possible, thinner; his jacket sleeves had sprouted a lush new crop of threads, as though to conceal hands now so badly bitten they appeared to have been gnawed by rodents … his eyes in the hollowed face, a delicate triangle of skin stretched on bone, jumped behind his glasses like hooked fish” (26). That the young man could only marginally sustain himself and “survive, more or less” (37) in Canada demands an acknowledgement of the failure of national vision, and indicates how Canada’s brutality towards immigrants can be enacted in less visible ways through the accumulation of relatively minor discriminations and alienations. Atwood’s November 1979 installment of “Kanadian Kultchur Komics”—in which a series of panels show Survival Woman’s sadly ineffectual attempts to bring an emaciated-looking Chilean man through Canadian immigration, and her recognition that “there’s more than one final solution” (55)—indicates Atwood’s recognition in the late 1970s of the multiple ways Canada enacts brutality upon ethnic minorities, and reiterates her observations concerning Canada’s failure to act in agreement with its ideal of multiculturalism.

***

That Atwood continued to re-conceptualize myths of Canada’s identity through the violent woman in the 1980s is evident in her representation of Becka in “Uglypuss.” Exemplifying Atwood’s continued fascination with the brutalizing woman as a paradoxical insider/outside figure, Becka exposes the radical contingency of Conservative myths denoting Canada’s uniform wealth and Canadian poverty as a minor
social problem. Commencing with the focalizing of Becka’s ex-boyfriend, Joel, “Uglypuss” details the residual antagonisms that persist between the couple following their failed relationship, and their continued mutual involvement in Toronto street theater, a form of narrative on the “storyteller continuum” (156) that Karen Stein finds links the individual narratives within Bluebeard’s Egg (1983). While the leftist inclinations of both Joel and Becka are suggested by their participation in the troupe’s production of “the Crucifixion according to Solemate Sox” (68) in front of a crowd of immigrant strikers, it is Becka who identifies on a personal level with those struggling for working-class equality. Contrastingly, Joel appears to characterize what Atwood terms the “middle-class [radical]” (“There are no Texts” 131), or one whose right-wing ideologies and background are masked by temporary involvements in leftist behavior, given his unspoken preference to avoid eateries that attract the “desperate” (76), the facility with which he is able to replace the numerous furnishings Becka destroys after discovering his post-break-up promiscuity, and his (mis)understanding of Canada as a space where “streets are so neat and clean and nobody lives on them, in shacks or storm sewers or laid out on mats along the sidewalks” (78). Drawing attention to what Arthur Redding describes as the potential for violence to be unsettling to and “destructive … of bodies, ideologies, social systems” (1), Becka destabilizes Tory mythologies of Canada’s co-operative economy by gesturing towards the many pockets of poverty within the nation and the brutal reality of how such impoverishment can provide an impetus to violent action. That Atwood had just prior to the publication of “Uglypuss” been writing “Kanadian Kutchur Komics” for the left-nationalist culture review This Magazine signals her conjoining of nationalist thinking and class-conscious art during this period, and
demonstrates her recognition of how an understanding of Canadian national identity can be enriched and reformed by class critique.

While there is much variation and disparity within political conservatism, as with any social institution, the constructions of national identity propagated through right-wing ideology have typically underestimated the prevalence of, and minimized the desperation associated with, poverty in Canada. The construction of Canada’s socialized welfare and the development of its politics of redistribution have contributed to conservative idealizations of Canada as a space of social safety and as a political entity that has dramatically reduced the threat of poverty imagined to manifest itself elsewhere, most particularly in the Third World or alongside vast wealth in American urban centers. Aimed at providing a catch-net for the crises induced through capitalism, such as “high rates of unemployment and inflation, and economic stagnation exacerbated by a worldwide recession” (Welch 272), Canada’s income security and social welfare provision are national policies held by many to create a society of economic moderation and a minimum standard of living for Canadians. Despite her widely-acknowledged leftist orientations, Atwood has at times appeared to support such mythologies of the nation’s uniform wealth in asserting that the “Canadian way” has been to adopt “a more co-operative view towards how the economy should be run” (“Where Were You” 90). Yet elsewhere, Atwood’s observation that “things seem[ed] to be getting worse economically” (“A Question” 56) in Canada in the late 1970s exemplifies her understanding that Canada continues to suffer the societal problems generated and perpetuated by class inequity. The dramatic cutbacks in Canada’s social programs during the 1970s, such as the decreases in Unemployment Insurance benefits (1975,
1977, 1978) and in Family Allowance benefits (1979), situate Atwood’s narrative within a period of economic vulnerability and indicate Atwood’s effort to bring to the fore issues which conservative national narratives have repeatedly relegated to the background.

The reader’s blindness to Becka’s financial instability in the segment focalized through Joel indicates how Canadian poverty is frequently indiscernible, often remaining secreted and unexposed; like the anonymous “out-of-work m[e]n begging for handouts on the street” (153) in “Spring Song of the Frogs,” the impoverished Canadians in “Uglypuss” convey the sense of a poverty that is without a distinctive face and that frequently evades notice. Davey has drawn attention to this imperceptibility of poverty in Atwood’s fiction in noting how “class difference … relatively invisible,” leading him to conclude that “class in much of Atwood’s early fiction is a displaced sign” (“Atwood and Class” 233) overwritten by various other social discourses. An immediate effect of this “invisible” class structure is that it further allows the political Right to overlook the pervasiveness of the nation’s poverty, and to mistake the inconspicuousness of Canadian poverty for its absence. Yet despite the frequent imperceptibility of Canadian class structures, which Atwood argues remain “so much more invisible” (“There are No Texts” 130) than those of countries such as England, the dissolution of Becka’s relationship and the shift to a focalization through her perspective exposes her underprivileged status as well as the communities of need that surround her. In this sense, Becka’s privation paradoxically suggests both the invisibility of poverty, and its pervasiveness. More precisely, Becka shares her experience of relative poverty with her two female cohabitants, and with most of the residents in Cabbagetown: a neighborhood
Torontonians from the mid-nineteenth-century until the 1980s associated with impoverishment and crime. Becka’s new lifestyle, which “reeks of impermanence” (91), further gestures outwards in pointing to the inconsistent employment of Leamington’s seasonal harvesters (79), and to the predominantly Portuguese workers whose labor is disrupted as they strike in protest of intolerable work conditions (68). Descriptions of Becka’s low-paying and hazardous job “mixing poster paints for the emotionally disturbed” highlight the impermanence of her employment, given her notice that “these days she’s lucky to have it” and her reflexive awareness that the label “emotionally disturbed” is a title “that right now includes her” (92). Insisting on the reading of Canadian figures as classed subjects, such representations outline the structure of poverty in Canada that links impoverishment with unemployment rates and mental instability, and give a distinctive face to Canadian poverty that disallows its further oversight.

In contrast to Joel, who views the personal as “trivial” (86), and Mort in “Bluebeard’s Egg,” for whom protests are “social occasions” (*Bluebeard’s* 188), Becka understands the inextricable connections between the personal and the political, and as such, perceives the political utility of her relationships with others and the seriousness of her surroundings. More broadly, recognition of this intersection allows Becka’s involvement with Joel and her later violent behaviors towards him to be read as multivalent gestures that speak privately and politically, signaling not only the inequity within their intimate relationship, but also the failure of society to support Becka beyond the confines of this union. While Joel may be hyperbolical in describing Becka as attempting to “encircle him, pin him down, force him into a corner” (78), his notice of her desire for security and for “permanence, commitment, monogamy” (78-9) is an
accurate assessment of Becka’s reaching for financial stability through her relationship with him and her search for what Davey describes as “something more than what the inherited social patterns offer” (Atwood 149). Yet her goals are achieved at the cost of her autonomy and independence, and Joel is quick to recollect that Becka was the one to move in with him (76), rather than the reverse, signaling his awareness of the dynamics of dependency between them. Even Becka recognizes the falsity behind her pseudo-epiphany that what she wants most in a partner is “gratitude equal to her own” when she immediately afterwards states that “even in this she’s deluding herself” (90). Framing the memories of her relationship with Joel through economic rhetoric, Becka stumbles over the fact that “she’s invested so much suffering in him, and she can’t shake the notion that so much suffering has to be worth something” (emphasis added 90-1), reflecting her earlier protests to Joel in which she declares, “I’m worth nothing to you. I’m not even worth any more than a sneeze” (emphasis added 82).

To the extent that Becka protests capitalist ideologies yet simultaneously acknowledges the need to secure her place in the society they create, her enactments of violence protest Joel’s failure, or refusal, to provide her with socio-economic security, thereby signaling not only the existence of Canadian poverty, but also the ways in which such impoverishment can lead to atrocious acts, the latter of which reflects Atwood’s assertion elsewhere that “Hunger corrupts” (“Red Fox” 17). Similar to her intersection of female brutality and the working class in Alias Grace through the impenetrable figure of Grace Marks, and in The Penelopiad through the twelve maids (68-9), Atwood’s construction of Becka highlights the interconnections between disparate social issues, and the recurrent theme of the violent woman’s failure to communicate the motivations
spurring her acts, given that Joel can only interpret Becka’s behaviors as those of a “Histrionic bitch” (85). Becka’s destruction of Joel’s Lay-Zee Boy recliner that for her stood as the essence of the bourgeoisie—pronounced by Becka as “boor-joo-ice” (70)—reveals what Joel cannot perceive: her desire to desecrate, profane, and perform violence upon the symbols of the capitalist class. Yet the deeply nuanced description of Joel’s vandalized chair additionally suggests Becka’s potential to enact similar violence on the members of his social class. When Joel returns to his apartment after failing to uphold his promise to meet Becka, he finds “the innards of his Lay-Zee-Boy, strewn across the floor, its wiry guts protruding from what’s left of the frame” (emphasis added 85), and Becka later reflects that the black naugahyde chair “might as well have been Joel” (88).

The semantic slippage that permits Becka’s target victim to be seen as both inanimate and animate, conceptual and corporeal, is rendered less ambiguous in her disturbing seizure of Joel’s cat Uglypuss. During this abduction, Becka is faced with the sentience of her feline victim as it “clawed its way through the first two garbage bags” and later lay motionlessness after she had tied it up “in one of Joel’s shirts and spray[ed] it with boot water-proofer to quiet it down” (89). While Becka’s brutal seizure of Joel’s cat is certainly intended to express her resentment over Joel’s failure to ensure her security, her gesture in other ways connotes her recognition of her own failures within the relationship and her manifold dependencies on Joel, leading her to regard Uglypuss as “a grotesque and stunted furry little parody of herself” (89). The final image of Becka, which depicts her “leaning her forehead against the cold shop window, staring through the dark glass … at the fur-coated woman inside, tears oozing down her cheeks” (93),
uses the image of a fur-clad woman to reiterate Becka’s regret over allowing herself to forego her autonomy and become reliant on Joel as her economic ægis. Yet in another reading of this indeterminate scene, the dominant sentiment is not one of repulsion, but of capitalist longing. Here, Atwood’s implementation of the nineteenth-century convention of the roguish female street urchin suggests that while class codes within Canada may be unique to the extent that they are relatively imperceptible, Canada’s poor are unexceptional to the extent that they connect with a long history of societal poverty within capitalist frameworks.114

***

Hailed by various critics as a sequel to *Surfacing*,115 *Wilderness Tips* (1991) extends Atwood’s early and continued focus on female violence by embedding what Carol Beran identifies as “the unknown, the foreign, the bizarre into everyday life in flat, dull Canada” (“Stranger” 74). In particular, “Hairball” extends images of female brutality through the urbanite Kat, who undermines Canadian codes of decorum and passivity by making violence manifest in both language and fashion aesthetics. In forcing such codes to sit uneasily and by drawing attention to the reality of Canadian violence, Kat highlights the expository tendencies of brutality and what Redding, drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, terms the “revelatory nature of violence” (43). Generating a narrative space within which national mythologies become undone, “Hairball” tracks Kat’s aggressive careerism in London’s fashion magazine industry until she is scouted by her married lover Gerald, or “Ger,” and persuaded to return to her home territory and to continue her work with a Toronto magazine. However, the discovery of her ovarian cyst—which Kat affectionately names “Hairball” on account of the hair and other human
features found within the benign growth—and Ger’s usurpation of her Toronto position following her post-operation leave of absence force the derailment of Kat’s career, which was in many ways already jeopardized by the climate of conservatism in Canada. More precisely, the insistence of her Canadian employers on portraying decency and “good taste” through their fashion magazine reveals how Kat’s preference for the aesthetics of brutality threatened her job security in Canada long before her infirmity. Yet Kat’s ineffaceable Canadian identity throughout these experiences further indicates how myths of Canadian propriety and innocence have become similarly imperiled, and recognized by the end as convincing narratives that obscure the darker, yet irrefragable, aspects of the nation.

Antithetical to the didacticism conveyed in the title *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood’s nationalism in “Hairball” is largely unimposing, perhaps contributing to Eleonora Rao’s assessment that Atwood’s “postnationalist” (101) phase is marked by the publication of the collection. Yet Atwood’s nationalist alignments are nonetheless discernible through her allusions to the Group of Seven in “Death by Landscape,” the Franklin Expedition in “The Age of Lead,” John Richardson’s *Wacousta* in “Wilderness Tips,” and through her construction of Kat in “Hairball” as a figure who, like her antecedents, illuminates troubling tendencies in her fellow citizens. Moreover, despite the unobtrusive nature of Atwood’s politics in “Hairball,” Kat poses a difficult challenge to readers by requiring them to adopt the double vision of examining individual acts of violence in order to recognize the humanity underlying them while simultaneously looking beyond the individual level to perceive how such violence re-writes Canadian metanarratives. In many ways, the latter paradoxically ensures the survival of the national imaginary.
through its continual renegotiation, a dynamic that is perhaps not surprising, given Atwood’s reminder elsewhere that “We are a nation of metamorphs” (“Homelanding”, *Good* 126) and the demonstrated tendency of violence to be both destructive and generative. Raymond Williams, in drawing etymological links between *violence* and *violation*, or “the breaking of some custom” (*Keywords* 279), suggests how violence can be (mis)perceived as an ultimately destructive act that ends in the overturning of ideological structures. However, his further suggestion that “order is recreated” through “the whole experience of … disorder” (*Modern* 66) aligns Williams with Atwoodian depictions of violence, and with later critics such Ness, Spencer, and Wollman who have identified how violence within the nation is a disruptive means that typically results in (re)constructive ends.

Embodying one of the few female characters that Hengen finds to be “effectively politicized” (*Atwood’s Power* 110) in the collection, Kat enacts gestures of brutality through language that not only reflect the generally violent disposition that has impelled her to “[Rambo] through the eighties” (36) and helped create her public reputation for the psychological and indirect violence of back-stabbing (46), but that additionally connote the often veiled dangers inherent in Canadian life. As Atwood intimates through her depictions of Kat’s doctor as one who regards ovarian surgery as an “[assault] on enemy territory” (33) and Brian Fawcett explains, the reality is that “Canadians—or most of us—live in an armed and subtly violent world” (32). Crafting her language to convey the synaesthetic sounds of weaponry, Kat alters Gerald’s name to “Ger” in order to emphasize the “hard” and “sharpened note of *r*,” and shortens her own name from Katherine to “Kat” because the latter sounds “pointed as a nail” (36), abbreviating gestures that call to
mind the abrupt, punchy statements that more broadly characterize Kat’s speech patterns. While evidence of Kat’s violence-inflected language may at first appear a matter of little import due to its association with shifting epithets and hypocoristic naming, the indelible significance of such linguistic gestures is not be underestimated, given that language was “among the earliest matters to be ‘nationalized’” (Corse 45) in Canada, and similarly “laid the bases for national consciousness” (Anderson 47) abroad. In short, Atwood recognizes that language is encoded with, and aids in propagating, national values and beliefs. While an analysis of the complex relationship between language and nation-building is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is useful to highlight this connection in order to illuminate how Kat’s conveyance of violence through language challenges the mythos of Canada and the Canadian idiom, the latter of which appears “Dull normal” (39), to align with the reality of harm they attempt to obscure.

In addition to her use of language to recalibrate notions of Canadian passivity, Kat further draws on linguistic customs and practices to re-evaluate metanarratives of Canadian politeness. Recognizing how linguistic gestures further stand as a mode of self-fashioning and social positioning, where specialized registers and ritualized verbal interactions are a principle means of conveying the appearance of external decency and propriety, Kat aims to interrupt and break in on cultural conversations of Canadian good manners. More precisely, Kat’s mocking pronunciation of her lover’s name while bidding him farewell (36) subverts conventions of etiquette by using them to express a “warning,” rather than well-wishes, and to convey to Gerald the sense that she is “ripping a medal off his chest” (36), thereby leaving uncertain the practices of politeness and norms of civility that Canadians have relied upon to define themselves. Given the deep nationalist
resonances of the collection and Atwood’s characterization of *Wilderness Tips* as “a very Canadian sort of book” (“To Write” 194), it is perhaps fitting to extend this image of stripped decoration to Canada, exposing how Canada can no longer claim the distinction of the polite nation and highlighting the absurdity of differentiating a society through a quality that invariably appears in every culture of the world. Moreover, by taking full advantage of language’s dual embeddedness within the production of national identity and decorum, Kat is enabled to challenge both associated discourses and their intersections in a single expressive gesture, leading Beran to observe how Kat uses her discomfiting language to “joyously [transgress] the Canadian code of good manners” (78).

Similar to her calculated use of linguistic gestures, Kat manipulates contemporary fashions into visual representations of brutality, building her career as a fashion prima donna in London with the avant-garde magazine “the razor’s edge” on her ability to “push things to extremes” and to create “grotesque and tortured-looking poses” which even her London advertisers at times find to be “Too bizarre” (35). Claiming that she “learned her trade well, hands-on” (37), Kat suggests that her aptitude for aestheticizing violence is the result of her own rehearsal of bellicose behaviors, exemplified by her practice of “the drop-dead stare” (37) and her preference for her “aggressive touch-me-if-you-dare suede outfit in armour grey” (44). Yet as with Atwood’s earlier fiction, “Hairball” highlights the essential illegibility of the intended message behind, and thus the miscommunication engendered through, violent acts. What remains fundamentally ambiguous is if Kat’s aggression reflects her participation in and performance of a timely cultural aesthetic, rendering her violent body a reified and branded consumer object, or
indicates her misguided outrage over the various men who have maltreated her, or possibly signals aspects of both. What is clear, however, is that Kat’s journey back to her home terrain and her transfer to the Toronto magazine *Felice* both exposes Canadians’ reception of Kat’s violent predilections as an affront to their sense of propriety, and exemplifies what Atwood has long observed as Canada’s crippling effect on the artist and her vision. Like conventions of language, codes of fashion are recognized by *Felice* executives as a mode of national expression and a means of visually demonstrating decency and “good taste” (42). In reflecting back to Canadians what they believe to be true of themselves, the fashion aesthetics of *Felice* highlight Paula Hastings’s observation that mass-circulated images have throughout Canada’s history been “instrumental in the development and negotiation of a national consciousness” (135). As such, the images showcased in the Toronto magazine must be closely monitored and meticulously presented in order to ensure their alignment with the unspoken codes that govern Canadian social life. Yet Kat’s knowledge of the distortion inherent in media representation and its manipulation of “the gap between reality and perception” (42) enables her to discern how the Toronto magazine, despite its attempts at portraying the national ethos, offers contrived images that misrepresent the nation’s reality, and that threaten to appear more real, given their glossy surfaces and their printing in vivid colors.

Seeing beyond the seductive image of Canada offered in *Felice*, Kat becomes increasingly aware that the nation’s obligation to propriety is not uniformly innocuous or entirely well-intended, frequently enacting its own form of brutality and compelling her to feel “caged, in this country, in this city, in this room … It’s too stuffy in here” (43). The increasing sense of defeat that Kat conveys through this reflection and its rhetorical
structure emphasizing a diminishing autonomy signals her loss over the “battle[s] … fought and refought” (42) with her Canadian employers over her design innovations and what Charles Adler describes as Canada’s “Tyranny of politeness” that threatens to “conquer freedom.” While her professional superiors proclaim their desire to avoid “tak[ing] risks” (42), thereby suggesting their preference for eschewing extremity in favor of compromise, Kat’s collegial confrontations reveal Canadians’ virulent and unwavering defense of decorum standards, and thus their potential for both mannerly and dissonant behavior, civility and aggression. Arnold Davidson’s observation that the broader design of *Wilderness Tips* enables “the tales … [to] set forth countering versions of the narratives they purport to relate” (“Negotiating” 185) indicates how the collection’s structural principle reinforces this demonstration of the range of Canadian identity. Yet the singular image that concludes “Hairball” works to the same effect. The unsettling depiction of the abstracted cyst— that prophetically signifies “new knowledge, dark and precious and necessary” and that “cuts” (47)—nestled within a box of chocolate truffles and sent by Kat to Ger as a seemingly courteous apology for missing his cocktail party, symbolizes how Canada hides its latent capacity for, even inclination towards, hostility behind the façade of decency and gestures of etiquette. Marlene Goldman, in her similar reading of Kat as an “ex-centric Canadian” (*Rewriting* 91), argues that Kat’s aggression paradoxically “epitomizes the sickness at the core of Western culture” (95). In an alternate reading, however, Kat and all her bodily fragments can be understood outside frameworks of pathology and occidentalism as denoting Canada’s potentially violent and deeply human center, and as a reminder to Canadians of “everything [they’ve] never wanted to hear about [themselves]” (“Hairball”, *Wilderness* 47).
Yet the persistence of the violent woman in Atwood’s fiction and her illumination of unsettling social trends suggests Atwood’s desire for Canadians to know themselves for all their admirable and undesirable characteristics, and to recognize themselves within a broader national community. If recent critical assessments are any indication, the constructs of nationality and nationhood that Atwood continually addresses remain of primary significance for both individual and group identifications despite the growing recognition of their existence as fabricated social realities. Considering the “rootedness of cultures in time and place, and the ways in which identity depends on memory,” Anthony Smith finds that “To date, we cannot discern a serious rival to the nation for the affections and loyalties of most human beings” (195). While Grant in 1965 lamented “Canada’s disappearance [as] a matter of necessity” (5)—therein offering a widely influential observation that has in some ways has come to pass given the growing influence of American foreign policy, popular culture and economies on Canadian lives, and the tendency of many Canadians to value personal profits over national affiliations—many aspects of the Canadian identity today remain strong in large part due to the nationalist efforts of writers such as Atwood. Through her fictional and critical works, Atwood perennially returns to constructions of the national sign and to the ways in which Canadians imagine themselves to be “Canadian.”

Integral to Atwood’s nationalist vision, however, is a deeply disorienting sense of revisionism, and the need to regard national identity as an unsettled weltanschauung and a narrative that approximates the nation’s reality only to the extent that it can be re-told from a variety of perspectives. Building on established associative structures linking nationhood to violence and gender, Atwood offers the violent woman as a luminary
figure who exposes the partial truths informing the Canadian imaginary, and who
highlights the internal differentiation of the nation, reminding Canadians of how “There
isn’t just one story; there are lots of stories” (“The Empress” 184). Through her repeated
efforts to make Canadians visible to themselves in new ways, and to reveal the
paradoxical tendency of the national genius to obscure certain national characteristics,
Atwood identifies the various ways Canadians attack, and are attacked by, their fellow
citizens, victimize, and are made victims of, one another. Like the naïveté of Atwood’s
pioneer in “Progressive Insanities,” who imagines his “land is solid / and stamped”
(Animals 38), Canadians’ refusal to acknowledge such variability in their national
caracter and their willed blindness to uncomfortable, yet necessary, national realities
renders them incapable of fully understanding themselves.

Notes

39 Paul Goetsch has similarly observed Atwood’s concern for “questioning the concept of
a monolithic, stable [national] identity” (175).
40 More broadly, the national imaginary can be understood as a socially constructed
metanarrative that organizes and enables national identity through exclusive ideological,
political, and socio-historical frameworks, yet that also encourages Canadians to overlook
how “our national identity is neither unified nor natural but something we work at
reinventing and protecting everyday” (Brydon “Reading” 172). Also see Roxanne
Rimstead (7).
41 Sarah Corse, in her comparative analysis of Canadian and American national identities,
states that “the overriding focus of the national identity debate is “Does Canada have a
national identity?””, looking to English-French cultural tensions as the primary reason that
“a unitary identity [is] problematic” (111). Also see Charles Taylor’s Reconciling the
Solitudes (25).
42 Jonathan Kertzer similarly suggests that “the nation persists because it is protean,”
adding that “Nationalism is so deeply ingrained in modern thinking that it can hardly be
considered just one dispensable ideology among others” (174).
43 See John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith’s “Preface” to Nationalism and Ranchod-
Nilsson and Tétrault’s “Introduction” to Women, States, and Nationalism.
44 For example, see Atwood’s interview with Peter Gzowski “Closet Cartoonist.” Also
see Goetsch’s “Margaret Atwood: A Canadian Nationalist” and Sandra Djwa’s “The
Where of Here: Margaret Atwood and a Canadian Tradition.”
45 See Coral Ann Howells’s “It All Depends on Where You Stand in Relation to the Forest” (48), and Frank Davey’s *Reading Canadian Reading* (63), respectively.
46 While Atwood concedes that “everything is ‘political’” and that “it would be impossible to be a Canadian writer of [her] generation without developing a political consciousness” (“Evading” 137), she further explains her reluctance to write from within ideological frames, given that “Writing and *isms* are two different things … art is uncontrollable and has a habit of exploring the shadow side, the unspoken, the unthought” (“If You Can’t” 21).
47 Also see David Thomas’s (Ed.) *Canada and the United States: Differences that Count*.
48 For a further critique of Anderson’s theory, see Himani Bannerji’s “Geography Lessons.”
49 See Paula Hasting’s “Branding Canada.”
50 While this construction of Canada as an authentic northern space is by no means uniformly held by all Canadians, Sherrill Grace suggests the pervasiveness of this representation in stating that “we have located North everywhere within our national borders” (*Canada* xii). Also see (45-76).
51 Atwood appears to be drawing on such connections in “Variations on the Word *Love*,” where soldiers sing of their love for their nation, while “raising / their glittering knives in salute” (*True* 82).
52 Arthur Redding similarly argues that violence “forms an integral, vitiating ground of any dynamic system whose purported equilibrium is merely a pretense” (5).
53 In acknowledgement of this simultaneously symbolic and bodily economy, women in countries such as the US, Israel, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Chechnya, and Iraq have insisted upon their participation in violent political struggle, and various insurgency groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Shining Path, and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Ealaam (LTTE), have been significantly strengthened by the inclusion of women fighters. See Nira Yuval Davis (89), Mia Bloom “Female Suicide Bombers” and Ness “The Rise in Female Violence.”
54 Atwood accedes to this notion in *Lady Oracle* when Joan compares her mother to a national crisis, and reflects on how her mother’s bringing the family closer together is similar to the ways in which “a national emergency, like the Blitz” (181) keeps a nation intact.
55 For example, Atwood insists on the necessity of “discovering your place” in order to “discover yourself” (“Travels Back” 113), and employs individuals as national metaphors in *Power Politics* when she states that her central poetic figures “are hostile nations” (37). Also see Spencer and Wollman (6) and Kertzer (43).
56 For example, see Sunera Thobani’s *Exalted Subjects*, where she examines how Canada’s social welfare system defines the nation through a female ethics of care and “the feminized characteristics of compassion” (108).
57 Robin Morgan further elaborates on this feminist resistance to constructions of nationalism in stating that “women seem, cross-culturally, to be deeply opposed to nationalism—at least as practiced in patriarchal society” (23).
58 The subversive and satiric national commentary that Atwood offers through her “Kanadian Kultchur Komics” (a comic series featuring Survival Woman that Atwood
published between 1975 and 1980 under the pseudonym Bart Gerrard) in This Magazine, a left-nationalist publication, signals her understanding of the subversive role that woman can play in (re)producing the nation.

For further elaboration on the five roles of women in the nation, see Umut Özkirimli’s *Theories of Nationalism* (205).

Such artifacts include Ludwig von Schwanthaler’s “Bavaria” (1837-48), Rolf Adlersparre Zink’s depiction of Sweden in “Moder Svea” (1892-4), Yevgeny Vuchetich’s rendering of Russia in his effigy “The Motherland” (1967), and the various references to Britain through Pallas Athene. For examples of the last, see Anne Helmreich’s “Domesticating Britannia: Representations of the Nation in *Punch*: 1870-1880.”

Frank Davey confirms this observation in stating that *Surfacing* “was widely read as a nationalist novel when published in Canada in 1973” (*Post-National* 9) and Coral Ann Howells similarly finds the novel to be a “[product] of 1970s English-Canadian cultural nationalism” (Margaret Atwood 37).

George Woodcock similarly finds that Atwood’s “criticism is not separate from her fiction and her poetry; it is another facet of the same whole, and it constantly inter-reflects with them” (“Bashful” 224). Also see Philip Marchand’s contribution to “Surviving Survival” (21) and Nathalie Cooke’s *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (68).

For an critical overview of such objections, see Walter Pache’s “A Certain Frivolity”: Margaret Atwood’s Literary Criticism.”

Atwood characterizes her four victim positions as follows: “Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim,” “Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology ... the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea,” “Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable,” “Position Four: To be a creative non-victim” (*Survival* 36-8).

In *Survival*, Atwood’s admission that she makes a “sweeping generalization” in her claim that each nation possesses a “single unifying and informing symbol” (31) highlights her ability to see beyond her own frameworks at the time of their composition and performs as an invitation for readers to engage with, and contest, her propositions. Moreover, it is likely that such dissent is an intended rhetorical effect of *Survival*, given that such opposition generates lively critical conversation and controversy around the topic of Canadian literature that Atwood felt had hitherto been denied as an area of study.

The alternate titles for *Surfacing*, which include *Camouflages* and *A Place Made of Water* (qtd. in Sullivan *The Red Shoes* 287) further suggest Atwood’s interest in exploring the deceptiveness and malleability of individual and national identity.

Sharon R. Wilson insists that this duplicitous search for identity is a common motif in Atwood’s writing, where “the narrators or personae of virtually all Atwood texts join readers on quests for self and national identity, and for understanding of the past” (“Mythological” 220).

Similarly, the narrator’s childhood drawings of “people-shaped rabbits” (97) living inside of suspended eggs that they could exit through rope ladders hanging from the roof,
and sit upon in “safety” (98), suggest her early, albeit misconstrued, interpretation of air raid shelters.

For example, see Atwood’s “The Curse of Eve,” and “Spotty-Handed Villainesses.” While these critical essays appear several years after Surfacing (1978 and 1993, respectively), they help to contextualize Atwood’s critique of constrictive gender conventions and indicate her early fictional exploration of topics that appear in her later criticism.

While Atwood’s theory of victim positions acknowledges the potential for individuals associated with positions one, two and three to demonstrate “anger,” this distemper remains indelibly connected to, and contingent upon, one’s experience of being victimized.

An early epigram for Surfacing, which drew on John Holland’s 1651 text, Smoke of the Bottomless Pit or A More True and Fuller Discovery of the Doctrine of Those Men Which Call Themselves Ranters or the Mad Crew, offered a pantheistic vision in declaring that “God is essentially in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature as in another. …I saw this expression in the Book of Thieves, that the essence of God was as much in the ivy leaf as in the most glorious angel” (qtd. in Sullivan The Red Shoes 288). Despite the editorial decision to delete this epigram from the published text, evidence of Atwood’s pantheistic beliefs remain evident in her valuing non-human life.

Elaine Scarry similarly renders problematic the easy division between the constructs of sentience and non-sentience in asserting that “Live vegetable tissue occupies a peculiar category of sentience” (66), and in observing how objects that humans help shape are regarded as “extensions of sentient human beings and as thus themselves protected by the privileges accorded sentience” (174). Also see Ronald Hatch’s “Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology” (187).

Such as Janice Fiamengo in her essay “‘It looked at me with its mashed eye’: Animal and Human Suffering in Surfacing.”

David is generally associated with biased evaluations and misogynist perceptions, he in this instance prompts a moment of national memory that is unnerving on account of both its source and its veracity.

See Zillah Eisenstein’s “Writing Bodies on the Nation for the Globe” (43).

While the narrator, in describing this memory, offers the caveat that her doll was not a sentient being, she further insists that “children think everything is alive” (140).

Such brutalities include, but are certainly not limited to, the Seven Years War and the battle on the Plains of Abraham, the War of 1812, the elimination of Newfoundland’s Beothuk people, the attacks against the civilian population of Beauharnois, the persecution of Louis Riel, the institution of residential schooling, and the Japanese internment. Also see Linda Hutcheon’s “‘A Spell of Language’” (11), J.A. Frank, Michael Kelly, and Thomas Kelly’s “The Myth of the ‘Peaceable Kingdom’,” and Judy Torrance’s Public Violence in Canada.

See Survival (92).

Atwood further examines this history of English-French conflict in her short story “The Bombardment Continues.”

The narrator’s recollection of her brother, joined by his classmates, participating in similar acts of hostility by throwing “snowballs at [the French Catholics] in winter and
rocks in spring and fall” (60) suggests how this inimical relationship between French and English Canadians is learned through early behaviors.

81 See Atwood’s “Where Were You When I Really Needed You” (87).

82 The narrator’s father and Paul attempted to overcome this cultural divisiveness through “ritual” (22) exchanges of vegetables, which enabled them to communicate in a deeply meaningful manner that circumnavigated the language barrier.

83 In creating and marketing habitant carvings that “sell in tourist handicraft shops” (21) and ornamental barometers with a “woman in her long skirt and apron … [a] man … carrying an axe” (26), English-Canadians further deny the veritable experiences of French-Canadians, imagining them as reified objects without a lived history.

84 Here, I diverge from the critical analysis of Cynthia Sugars, and her sense that “In these moments the father’s ghost becomes explicitly fused with the Aboriginal ones,” thereby creating the effect of “a single legitimating genealogical line” (150).

85 While the novel’s opening paragraphs suggest how the imperial presence is fading in Canada, it is observations such as these that indicate how its legacy continues in the present day.

86 This image anticipates Atwood’s later attempt to read violence in Canada’s emblems and to view the Canadian flag as an ideograph of the violence enacted within the nation.

87 In an early interview, Atwood similarly notes that “you can define yourself as innocent and get killed, or you can define yourself as a killer and kill others. The ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world” (“Dissecting” 16).

88 Also see Atwood’s “A Question” (22).

51 This approach to discourses of multiculturalism in Canada diverges from the analyses of critics such as Bannerji, Thobani, and Donna Bennett, who have engaged the topic of pluralism not only to show the failure of society to live up to this ideal, but also to reveal the problems inherent to multiculturalism itself. While such critics’ evaluation of ethnic pluralism is valuable and necessary to ameliorate the shortcomings inherent to any ideological system, such discourses did not emerge until significantly after the publication of “The Man From Mars” and are somewhat peripheral to Atwood’s interests in the narrative. See Bannerji (37), Thobani (143-175) and Bennett (193-4).

90 For a more detailed overview of the history of equity reform in Canada, see Walter Johnson’s The Challenge of Diversity (1-17).

91 Thobani points out that “From Confederation until the 1960s and 1970s, immigration and naturalization legislation distinguished first British and French, and later, other Europeans as ‘preferred races’ for integration into the nation” (75).

92 See James (26-27) and Thobani (15).

93 Also see Diana Brydon (111).

94 See Hobsbawm (9-11).

95 The numerous similarities between Christine and Joan from Lady Oracle (1976), including their mutual participation in the United Nations Club, and Joan’s similar experience of being pursued by an unnamed and “sprightly, bright-eyed foreigner” (99) of uncertain origins, suggests that Atwood, in “The Man From Mars,” is exploring in greater depth themes she had cursorily examined in Lady Oracle.
96 A catalogue of the various taxonomies used by Christine’s male peers to classify women, including “cock-teaser,” “cold fish,” “easy lay,” and “snarky bitch” (29), suggest that it is the men of her own culture, rather than those of a foreign culture, that she has reason to suspect and fear.

97 Christine’s aggression towards her admirer further resembles Rennie’s “angry” reaction to an overly friendly yet “harmless” (75) Caribbean man in Bodily Harm. Observing her response to the young man, Paul identifies Rennie’s behavior as “Alien reaction paranoia” (76). Also see “A Travel Piece” (Dancing 153).

98 In his speech to the House of Commons on October 8, 1971, Trudeau aligns the acceptance of ethnic pluralism with nationalism and maintains that, “a policy [of multiculturalism] should help break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity, if it is to mean anything in a deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others.”

99 Also see Jerome Rosenberg’s Margaret Atwood (121).

100 While John Ibbitson argues for the “lack of a national mythic identity” in Canada, and for the ways in which this absence “actually makes it easier for migrants from more deeply rooted cultures to integrate into the national fabric,” Atwood conversely argues that it is the durability of Canada’s national myths that make immigrants’ integration into Canadian communities difficult and bewildering.

101 Also see Hans Oberdiek Tolerance: Between Forbearance and Acceptance (1-8).

102 See above note 20.

103 Rimstead offers a useful illustration of this myth in examining the advertisements and articles in a March 1993 publication of Maclean’s, a mainstream Canadian weekly news magazine. In her analysis, Rimstead argues that Maclean’s generates a Canadian national identity that largely precludes the poor and “project[s] poverty onto the Third World while simultaneously erasing or rationalizing poverty in Canada” (228). Also see Rimstead (7, 14).

104 In suggesting that California street theater is the tradition from which his political performances in Toronto emerge (67), Joel overlooks Canada’s historic participation in this form through the “Workers’ Experimental Theater” and the agit-prop theater troupes emerging from Toronto in the 1930s. See Toby Gordon Ryan’s Stage Left: Canadian Theater in the Thirties and Scott Forsyth’s “Communists, Class, and Culture in Canada.”

105 In particular, see her October 1977 installment of “Kanadian Kultchur Komics.”

106 For a more detailed discussion of Conservative perspectives on poverty in Canada, see Johnson (212-219).

107 For example, see Atwood’s interview with Beryl Langer “There Are No Texts without Life” (131-2).

108 Atwood’s refusal to align herself indiscriminately with a single political party and her ability to critique orthodox political allegiances is evident in her definition of politics: “Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom…It’s not just elections and what people say they are—little labels they put on themselves. And it certainly isn’t self-righteous puritanism of the left, which you get a lot of, or self-righteous puritanism of the right” (“Using What” 149).
Shereen Ismael notes that such reductions were “not an exclusively Canadian phenomenon. Throughout the Western world, the welfare state came under attack as high unemployment, high inflation and high public sector deficits badgered the post-industrial economies of Western nations” (32).

Rimstead argues that, beyond Conservative myths of the nation’s uniform wealth, the reasons for the relative invisibility of Canadian poverty include: the propensity for Canada’s poor to “pass in and out of poverty” (16), the tendency of impoverished “women, children and families” to be “less visible on the street” (17), the relegation of the poor to isolated and ghettoized areas (12), and our capacity for not seeing what we do not want to see (5).

While suggestions of Becka’s underprivilege surface earlier through Joel’s suggestion that he cannot be held personally responsible for all of “the things that he had and she hadn’t” (70), it is not until the shift in narrative perspective that the reader is made fully aware of Becka as the “have not” within her previous relationship.

Similarly in The Penelopiad, Penelope’s maids perform a tune in which the “Third Maid” proclaims her longing for a “young hero [to] take [her] for his wife” (52), and forecasts that without this, “Hard work is [her] destiny” (52).

In early versions of the narrative, Becka pronounces “bourgeoise” as “boor-jew-wize” (“Uglypuss [Drafts]”), indicating how Atwood initially coupled Becka’s physical violence with a verbal violence that takes aim at Joel’s Jewish heritage.

Atwood own academic focus on and teaching of Victorian literature denotes her familiarity with such nineteenth-century conventions.

For example, see Brian Fawcett’s “Scouting the Future” (29), Howells’s Margaret Atwood (50), and Isabel Carrera Suarez’s “Yet I Speak, Yet I Exist” (240).

The ambiguous nature of Kat’s ovarian cyst anticipates both the confusion surrounding Grace Mark’s pregnancy at the end of Alias Grace—where Grace acknowledges that her pregnancy “might as easily be a tumour” (550)—as well as the final use of the cyst in “Hairball” as an ambivalent signifier. Also see Atwood’s poem “Cell” in Morning in the Burned House (47-8).

The increasingly apparent connections between Atwood’s violent women—linking Kat, whose name connotes “street-feline” (36), to Becka, who repeatedly agonizes over her cat-like dependencies on Joel, and further connecting Kat to the narrator of Surfacing, given their mutual affairs with married men, their similar experiences with abortion, and their shared description as twinned figures—suggest Atwood’s self-reflexive awareness of the growing tradition within her fiction of the violent woman as a figure with unsettling ties to the nation.

In her review of Wilderness Tips, Grace similarly points out how Atwood is re-visiting previously explored characterizations in her constructions of female figures, contributing to her assessment of the collection as “unmistakable, familiar Atwood” (“Surviving” 32).

Examining the history of nation-building in Canada, Corse argues for the centrality of language and literature in developing English and French conceptions of communal identity. For the French in particular, Corse posits that, “Quebec literature and the Quebec literary tradition are generally understood … as originating within the French tradition … [and] as deeply tied to issues of French-Canadian development and nationalism” (45).
Also see John Hutchinson’s *Nationalism* (105) and Ray Conlogue’s *Impossible Nation* (21, 133).

For example, see *Survival* (177-194) and “Canadian-American Relations.”

Cusack adds that visual aesthetics are a “powerful tools for national expression” and are “crucially engaged in the representation of national identity” (1), given the tendency of visual art to be mass disseminated, publicly visible, and transcendent of linguistic barriers. As such, visual aesthetics, like language, are revealed to play an important role in the building and (re)construction of national consciousness.

The image of Kat’s cyst set inside in a box of confectionary recalls the women-shaped cake that concludes *The Edible Woman* and that is similarly used to prompt a re-thinking of social conventions.
Chapter 3
Exis-tensions: Surviving the Red Shoes Syndrome
in Margaret Atwood’s Artist Fictions

keep silent and avoid
red shoes, red stockings, dancing.
Dancing in red shoes will kill you.

(Atwood Two-Headed 102)

In [the Victorian Period], a woman writer was a freak, an oddity, a suspicious character. How much of that sentiment lingers on today, I will leave you to ask yourselves …

(Atwood “The Curse” 219)

As a young child, Margaret Atwood, like many other women of her generation, was taken to see Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s film The Red Shoes (1948), which imparted to her the fatalistic message that “You could not have both your artistic career and the love of a good man as well, and if you tried, you would end up committing suicide” (“The Curse” 224). The enduring impact of this edict, which positions womanhood and artistry as antithetical subject positions, can be seen not only in Atwood’s donning of striking red footwear at the 2005 Calgary WordFest,124 and her remarking on her interviewer’s “little red shoes” (“Mallick” 37) in her 2007 conversation with Chatelaine magazine, but also in her more extended gestures of fictional representation. Atwood’s abiding interest in the threats of self-harm faced by creative women surfaces perennially in her artist fictions such as Lady Oracle (1976), Cat’s Eye (1988) and The Blind Assassin (2000), which incite recognition of self-destruction as a
form of violence and reflect her fascination with the female artist as a figure of existential tension. While the difficulties of women’s artistry have long been acknowledged by Atwood and numerous others, notably Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, it is Atwood’s proposal of “the Red Shoes syndrome” (“The Curse” 226) and her female artists’ attempts to overcome their anticipated self-violence that provides the focus of this chapter. Revising Victorian strategies for representing female suicide to account for the diversity of women’s experiences and self-reflexively commenting on Atwood’s own struggles as a woman artist, the Red Shoes Syndrome offers a broader conceptual framework to what Atwood terms “the perils of creativity” (“The Curse” 226) that artists such as Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and perhaps even Atwood’s friend Gwendolyn MacEwen, suffered in the extreme. Yet as my broader study has shown, Atwood’s violent female characters can be regarded as escape artists and adroit revisionists who resist prescriptive cultural narratives, including those that Atwood herself has labored to define and bring to light. More precisely, through dissociative strategies and projection, Atwood’s female artists are able to evade the deadly designs of the Red Shoes Syndrome and thus rely on their capacity for unconventional thought as a means of protection, rather than persecution. Yet, as will become evident, the projective strategies female artists come to rely upon frequently entail as many problems as solutions.

By accounting for the complex and often irreconcilable demands of femininity and creativity that can lead women to self-destruction, Atwood’s proposal of the Red Shoes Syndrome revises unidimensional Victorian representations of female suicide and self-harm and the mis-perceptions they entail. Typically inscribing women as victims of
romantic love, madness, or their own passivity. Victorian female suicides were depicted with relative uniformity, leaving women victimized not only by their own misfortune, but also by the social narratives delimiting how their infelicity should conclude. Deborah Gentry maintains that nineteenth-century paradigms “present[ed] female suicides in literature as resulting from medical illness and *mal d’amour*” (88) and “feminized” the suicidal act, thus enabling men to distance themselves from, and objectively examine, the experience of death. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan’s hasty composition of the latter half of her gothic romance, *Escape from Love*, in which the Countess of Piedmont “now quite demented, plunged to her death off a battlement during a thunderstorm” (176) following the loss of her lover, Sir Edmund Devere, clearly satirizes such conventions and the simplistic female interiority they imply. Nineteenth-century representational strategies frequently depicted female subjectivity as inextricably bound to romantic relationships, perhaps even coterminous with them, and when considered alongside the Victorian tendency to regard suicide as a defeat, rather than release, of the self (Gates 27), it is possible to see how female suicides comprised a distressing statement of finality. It was not until the end of the Victorian era that suicide was more widely imagined as a sign of social malaise, inculpating social institutions for their lack of accountability to individuals, and female suicides in particular were seen in relation to the stresses and discriminations endured by women artists. Showalter explains that it was during the “Feminist phase” (1880-1920) that female artist suicides “became conspicuous for the first time” (*A Literature* 194), and the “female aesthetic was to become another form of self-annihilation for women writers, rather than a way of self-realization” (*A Literature* 240).
Atwood’s Red Shoes Syndrome extends from this early effort to expose and interpret the potential lethality of the female artist role and reflects the formative influence of Powell and Pressburger’s film on Atwood’s conception of female creativity. The Red Shoes stars Moira Shearer as Victoria Page, a young ballet protégé under the direction of the doctrinaire but alluring impresario Boris Lermontov. Claiming early on that she “dances to live,” Victoria is utterly devoted to her art and, under the guidance of Lermontov, is enabled to foresee the full extent of her potential as a prima ballerina. Yet she soon learns that the pursuit of her art comes at an insufferable price. Soon after falling in love with the young composer Julian Craster, Victoria is forced to choose between romantic love or her art. Stricken by the immense loss each decision entails, Victoria decides to take her life by jumping in front of a train. Reflecting on this film years later, Atwood finds that “there is some truth” (“The Curse” 226) behind the film’s message as well as paradox: “Woman and [Artist] are separate categories; but in any individual woman, they are inseparable” (“On Being” 195). Staged by Gilbert as “The Plath Myth” (“A Fine” 248), and elsewhere by Gilbert and Gubar as a struggle between a woman’s angel and her monster, wherein a woman’s “aesthetic ideal” comes into conflict with “becoming an author [which] meant … becoming an ‘unsexed’ or perversely sexed female … becoming a monster or freak” (The Madwoman 17, 34), the Red Shoes Syndrome gives a new name to the widely discussed conflict between women’s restrictive socialization and their artistic impulses. At the heart of this struggle is the en-gendering of artistry and the enduring belief that creativity is an exclusively male preserve. Nicole Ward Jouve demonstrates that “within the classical Greek and the Judeo-Christian civilizations and their European offspring” women have been instilled
with the idea that creative acts are “firmly aligned with the male of the species,” thus rendering the “female creator … a deviant” (2). Atwood, recalling her early influence by Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, similarly finds that women are early acquainted with the understanding of “Man [a]s the poet, woman [a]s the Muse” (“The Curse” 224), further suggesting how her conception of the Red Shoes Syndrome arises in response to her encounters with the cultural belief that women’s artistic successes are an indelible sign of their failure to be “woman.”

The continuing influence of the Red Shoes symptomatology on the critical and fictional writings of Atwood is perhaps best explained by the unsettling persistence of the syndrome more broadly amongst Western women artists. Denise Levertov, in a deeply personal essay written in the weeks following the death of Sexton, remarks the unsettling manner in which women passively inherit this fatal narrative as an inescapable imperative that ironically escapes being subjected to critical evaluation. Levertov observes that many young female artists hold a blind faith in the idea that “in order to become poets themselves, they [have] to act out in their own lives the events of [Plath’s],” to which she adds her fear of seeing “a new epidemic of the same syndrome occurring as a response to Anne Sexton’s death” (*my emphasis* 80). Yet Sexton, in her poem, “The Red Shoes,” forecasts the ineluctable nature of this bequest when she writes,

I tie on the red shoes.

They are not mine.

They are my mother’s.

Her mother’s before.
Handed down like an heirloom

…They could not stop. (316)

The inevitability of artistic influence, and women artists’ reliance on, and responsiveness to, their precursors’ traditions and practices, has undoubtedly been a source of empowerment and inspiration, allowing women to chart their own artistic course through those of their progenitors. Yet the observations of Levertov and Sexton point to how the Red Shoes Syndrome comprises a shadowy and often overlooked underside to this female tradition. Moreover, the contagious nature of violence, explored by René Girard in his observation that “the mimetic character of violence is so intense that once violence is installed in a community, it cannot burn itself out” (81), seems to find a particularly pronounced expression in acts of self-harm. Revealing how self-injurious behavior is dangerously communicable irrespective of who has previously partaken in it, Barent Walsh and Paul Rosen describe how the “contagion phenomenon” associated with self-harm can result in “self-mutilative epidemics” (viii).

Yet the recurrent appearance of the Red Shoes Syndrome in Atwood can be additionally linked to the manner in which it reflects and gives theoretical shape to her own experiences as a woman artist. Rosemary Sullivan’s unofficial biography of Atwood’s determinative years, *The Red Shoes*, demonstrates how others have similarly employed the rubric of the Red Shoes Syndrome as a *roman à clef* to explore her early belief that “she couldn’t get married, have children, and be a writer too” (Sullivan 69). While this discussion does not propose the reading of Atwood’s fiction as an analogue for her life experiences, given that even biographer Nathalie Cooke characterizes Atwood’s work as merely “seemingly … autobiographical” (*my emphasis* “Lions” 17), it does
suggest that Atwood to an extent draws on her personal past in giving shape to her imaginative work, and that she has made various attempts to evade the difficulties and impasses faced by many female artists. Foremost among these is her repeated use of assumed names to publish her creative work. Under the name Shakesbeat Latweed, an amalgam combining her own name with that of Dennis Lee’s, and the androgynous M.E. Atwood, Atwood as an undergraduate published her written work in *Acta Victoriana*, Victoria College’s literary journal. Similarly for her visual art, she used the pseudonyms Bart Gerrard to publish her *Kanadian Kultchur Komics* in *This Magazine*, and Charlatan Botchner for her illustrations in her children’s book *Up in the Tree* (1978). With the exception of her work in children’s illustration, a field which likely favors, rather than frowns upon, female contributors, Atwood’s ambiguously- or male-coded pseudonyms reflect her efforts to evade the discriminations she felt ineluctably faced the female creative genius. Yet as her continuing prolificity and half-humorous explanation that being the “old crone of Can Lit” is “Better than being the dead 31-year-old” (“A Practical”) attest, Atwood has become one of the greatest exceptions to the Red Shoes Syndrome’s moribund conclusion. While she has been unmistakably affected by the archetype of the fated female artist, the revisionist spirit that is characteristically seen throughout her work is again made evident in her efforts to imagine for her fictional women artists an alternate ending to the narrative of the Red Shoes Syndrome.

Atwood’s surprising proclivity for creating pathological frameworks to explain behavior both reflects her scientific background, and initially suggests her sense of individual action as scripted and foreordained. Conceiving of such afflictions as the Red Shoes Syndrome, the “Rapunzel Syndrome” (*Survival* 209), the “Handsome Prince
syndrome” (“Introduction … Robber”), the “Quiller-Couch Syndrome” (“On Being” 197), the “Arctic syndrome” (Animals 48-9), the process of Canadian expatriation that follows “a general pattern … like a disease” (“Canadian Club”), Canadian “paranoid schizophrenia” (“Afterword” 62), the “disease of spirit” known as “The Colonial Mentality” (“Canadian Culture”), the “great Canadian Victim Complex” (“Dissecting” 13), and most recently the Moral Disorder, Atwood ventures to give shape to Canadians’, animals’, men’s and women’s experiences. Yet her taxonomies do not aim to institutionalize, reduce, or prescribe behavior, as might be assumed by such diagnostic frames, but to expose how individuals frequently defy the definitive limits placed upon them, and how cultural constructs are often inadequate to the task of creating stable meaning around individual and collective bodies. Working through the problematic pathologizing of individuals that strips them of their ethical responsibility and free will, Atwood explains that there is an excess that surrounds such labels and that “Naming your own condition, your own disease, is not necessarily the same as acquiescing in it” (Survival 42). More precisely, through various modes of projection, Atwood’s fictional female artists are enabled to save themselves from the deadly trajectory of the Red Shoes Syndrome that they initially seem fated to follow. Unlike the women of the “Feminist phase” described by Showalter, whose aesthetics became an additional mode of self-annihilation, or Plath’s speaker in “Lady Lazarus,” who similarly imagines that “Dying / Is an art” (17), Atwood’s female artists ultimately refuse to allow their creativity to become the vehicle of their self-destruction, opting instead to use their capacity to imagine their world Other-wise as a survival strategy.
Numerous critics have noted Atwood’s use of dissociative strategies in her fictional representations of violent women and others’ responses to them, indicating how the individual subject in Atwood’s fiction, despite her singular appearance, is typically intertwined with the lives of those around her. Moreover, while both Atwood and her female characters at times express their reluctance to place full faith in the validity and accuracy of psychoanalytic paradigms, Atwood’s use of such frameworks in her critical (Survival 36-7, 91) and fictional writing suggests her understanding of psychoanalysis and displacement theory as useful cultural discourses. As a topic Sigmund Freud returned to throughout his career, projective fantasies constituted for him a primary means of ego defense, and a protective strategy used by individuals to contend with those traits or characteristics that are detrimental to the self. Through this “psychical mechanism,” attributes that are internally insupportable are “ejected from internal perception into the external world, and thus detached from [the self] and pushed on to someone else” (Freud 13:62-3). As an everyday “normal proceeding” that “has a regular share assigned to it in our attitude towards the external world” (12:66), projective fantasies stem from a basic logic that Freud makes clear: “the subject can protect himself against an external danger by fleeing from it and avoiding the perception of it, whereas it is useless to flee from dangers that arise from within” (20:126). The ego’s transposing outward that which causes pain within itself is in many regards a means of boundary maintenance, where the projected image is a product of the subject’s internal world that is forcibly relocated beyond the demarcation of the self, enabling the individual to dispel to the outside that which she does not want to contain inside herself. Freud notes, however, that while projection enables the subject to disassociate from her unendurable traits, it
does not allow her to be free of them, since that which “was abolished internally returns from without” (3:458). In this sense, the projected attribute is not entirely lost from reality, but staged to return continually to haunt the individual, reminding her of that which she has attempted to deny within herself. To the extent that Atwood’s female artists employ projective strategies to distance themselves from insufferable aspects of their identity, they align themselves with Freudian accounts of the defense mechanism, but not without qualification. In challenging the sweeping (and in many cases insupportable) assumption underlying Freudian theory that all projective efforts and “pathological phenomena [are] derived in a general way from repression” (12:66),137 Atwood’s female artists demonstrate how defense processes are often more conscious than Freud’s theory permits, and thus the intentionality of their self-preservation. More aptly, the female artist’s dissociation, as a purposeful and creative solution to the problem of identity conflict, highlights how their survival does not happen to them, but is deliberately sought.

*Lady Oracle* highlights the maturation of, and challenges encountered by, the female artist through the novel’s first-person narrator, Joan Delacourt, leading numerous critics to observe the substantive influence of the *Künstlerroman* form,138 as well as that of *The Red Shoes* film and the related narratives of Lord Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shallot,” and Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* and *The Red Shoes*.139 As a young girl who, at an impressionable age, discovers her artistic inclinations alongside the obstacles inhibiting it, Joan inherits from her mother, Frances, and other women in her early life the notion that abiding social scripts of femininity means not pursuing one’s own imaginative expression. The self-destructive eating habits that Joan turns to and the
“enormous … gross … diseased” (121) body she consequently develops physically manifest both the pernicious limitations imposed on the mentality and physicality of young women, and Joan’s “rage, helplessness and sense of betrayal” (52) in confronting them. Yet her escape to England and movement away from her repressive childhood spaces signal her desire to evade the deadly teleology of the Red Shoes Syndrome; Atwood’s pregnancy with her daughter Jess while writing Lady Oracle likely inspired her decision to revise the novel’s original plot, which “start[ed] with a fake suicide and end[ed] with a real one” (“A Question” 45), and to imagine how female and artist identities can be conjoined to less tragic ends. Influenced by a different type of female inheritance from her Aunt Lou, which offers her a monetary reward if she is able to recover her health, Joan is exposed to the possibility of returning to art and of starting a new life, and then lives, for herself. Reluctant to repeat the disappointments of her earlier attempts at creative expression through dance, Joan turns to writing but only by working under numerous noms de plume, thereby indicating, as Catherine Sheldrick Ross explains, her resolution to maintain her identities as both woman and artist “but to keep the two roles separate” (463). Moreover, while numerous critics have addressed the importance of the Red Shoes Syndrome as a paratext of Lady Oracle, absent from such discussions is a sustained examination of how Joan’s obesity aligns with the self-harm anticipated by the Red Shoes Syndrome, and how her projecting her creative talents onto various alternate identities can be interpreted as a dissociative survival strategy. In contributing such elements to the novel’s exegesis, this discussion indicates how, for Joan, “it wasn’t more honesty that would have saved [her] … it was more dishonesty” (37).
Joan’s beginning her autobiographical recollection of her childhood with the remembrance that her mother named her after the Broadway dancer and actress Joan Crawford illustrates her early sense of herself as an artist figure. Her induction into Miss Flegg’s dance course at the age of seven affords her the opportunity to consummate this self-perception, although Frances interprets this enrollment otherwise as a fashionable gesture for a mother and an opportunity for Joan to become “less chubby” (43). While Joan initially pursues her artistic potential in an indirect manner by “gogg[ling] at the china music-box figurines … and imagin[ing] [herself] leaping through the air” (43), she soon ventures to embody this ideal and to develop her abilities by “practice[ing] for hours in the basement, the only place [she] was allowed to do it” (44). Yet the studio space that Joan similarly relies on to cultivate and expand her creative abilities doubles as the arena in which others endeavor to inculcate restrictive lessons about how to perform femininity. Similar to the water-color painting that Joan envisions young women learning in finishing school and that serves as a vehicle to instill “self-control” (10), Joan’s dance classes, which were “largely a matter of drill” (44), are a means to indoctrinate young girls with circumscribed ideas about how to conduct and display the female body. For Miss Flegg, “the final effect was everything” (47-8). From the backstage preparations, in which young dancers learn the art of “painting … faces” (47), to the rehearsed numbers, in which girls practice “salutes” and “delicate flittings” (45) while ironically harnessed with wings, the culture at Miss Flegg’s dance studio is one in which young women are created products, not creative producers.

While the lasting impact of such restrictive lessons on Joan are witnessed years later in her admission that she wants to fit “into a mold of femininity” and that she covets
the “fluffy skirt … glittering tiara” (103), the incompatibility between Joan’s childhood self—with her artistic aspirations and unconventional female physique—and the ideals instilled by such lessons is immediately evident. Her body spills over the seams of her dance costume’s tight bodice, and she appears “obscene, senile almost, indecent” (46) in such prohibitive clothing and conditions. Yet the show goes on, and when Joan’s unseemly appearances land her an improvised role in the annual spring recital, the mothball dance that she is forced to perform becomes one of “rage and destruction,” a disaster that she “bump[s],” “stamp[s]” and “flop[s]” (50) her way through. The overwhelming applause that Joan receives predominantly from the “fathers rather than mothers” (50) in the audience, and which she later recognizes was in response to her “not being taken seriously” and being regarded as merely “a flawless clown” (286), is therefore less a demonstration of audience sympathies than an indication of how art is deeply gender-coded. More precisely, while women such as Miss Flegg and Frances paradoxically utilize creative practices to instill feminine convention, men interpret artistic performance as a marker of the phallocentric creative tradition, and thus Joan’s erratic and crude performance as a sign of female failure and ineptitude within the creative realm.

In her recollections, Joan concedes that she had since birth been a “plump” (43) child; however, it is only after perceiving the untenability of pursuing her art as a woman that she recalls adopting markedly self-destructive eating habits, thus confirming Susie Orbach’s observation that eating disorders are a “response by women to the conditions of their upbringing and the wider social world” (15) and “their attempts to deal with the[ir] contradictory requirements” (24). While many critics have politely overlooked or
attempted to abstract Joan’s obesity, her excessive eating poses an important hermeneutic challenge, given that it must be read on both a literal level as a threat to Joan’s physical well-being, and on a figurative level as a metaphor for Victoria’s fatal jump in front of a train. During her initial viewing of The Red Shoes film, Joan’s “munch[ing] faster and faster as [Victoria] became more and more entangled in her dilemma” (my emphasis 82) is rendered as the locomotive that eventually claims Victoria’s life. Despite the numerous warnings she receives over the dangers of unhealthy eating from both the living (70, 209) and the deceased (108, 118), including her Aunt Lou’s fatal heart attack after years of libertine eating habits, Joan continues her perilous eating less from a desire for wholeness and fulfillment than from a recognition of their impossibility. The seemingly endless catalogue of unhealthy foods that Joan consumes in immoderate quantities, including “half of an orange layer cake” (69), a “double helping of french fries” (70), “chocolate cake” (87), “wads of pink cotton candy and greasy popcorn” (89), “a triple-decker Kraft Cheese and peanut butter sandwich” (98), “five or six hot dogs and … a few Honey Dews” (115), “nine orders of fried chicken in a row “ (122) and later a “Family Bucket” of “Kentucky Fried Chicken” (272), “all the dry doughnuts and pieces of fish-glue pie [she] could afford” (141), and even “half a chicken, a quarter of a pound of butter, a banana cream pie … two loaves of bread and a jar of strawberry jam” (177) in a single sitting, illustrates how Joan’s excessive consumption is accentuated by a narrative indulgence in the superfluous mention of these items. Such prolonged self-destruction is devalued by Frances, who argues that if one were serious she should “stick a gun in [her] mouth and pull the trigger” (73); however, Joan’s protracted means of self-harm suggest that she is attempting to extend not her own
suffering, but that of others. Though she fantasizes about her “lethal energies” (217) and longs for “something horrible [to] finally happen [to her]” (62), she additionally wants “someone besides [her] … to suffer” (50) as well.

One of the most enduring effects of Joan is the manner in which she forces readers to confront the body that “cramps, sweat[s], burp[s], fart[s]” (319), the physiology of excess consumption, and thus the injury that her habitual over-indulgence enacts against herself and, in some circumstances, others. As Gavin Fairbairn makes clear, self-injury “can be harmful to people other than the person who [harms] himself … sometimes, indeed, [self-harm] may be intended to harm others” (162). In their readings of *Lady Oracle*, Pamela Bromberg, Sarah Sceats and J. Brooks Bouson argue for how Joan’s binge eating is employed as “a weapon” (21, 101, 67, respectively), drawing repeated notice to the ways in which Joan’s acts of direct violence against the self in over-eating can further be seen as indirect acts of psychological harm against her mother, whom she holds accountable for her impossible subject position as a female artist. Joan imagines that her mother, in offering her an artist’s name and a means to pursue her expressivity alongside messages that she restrict herself by becoming more conventionally feminine, “thin and beautiful” (88), is singularly responsible for her existential crisis; according to Joan, it is her mother that “betrayed [her]” (49), rather than her society that enables and perpetuates such restrictions on women. Practicing acts of violence that are simultaneously direct and indirect at a young age teaches Joan how a singular gesture of violence can create multiple indirect victims (59), and even enables her later on to recognize Arthur’s adoption of a similar strategy, in which he “tr[ies] to destroy himself in order to prove to [Joan] that [she] was destructive” (257). Attempting
to convey to her mother her feelings of betrayal, Joan parades her body in “clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped” (my emphasis 87) and that create a “rotund … effect” (88), suggesting how Joan actively seeks outfits that dually emphasize her anger and unhealthy physique. Such displays of her daughter’s obesity effectively reduce Frances to fits of tears and alcoholism, yet similar to other attempts to communicate through violence, Joan is unable to clearly convey meaning through her conspicuous corpulence, thus leaving her mother confused and crying, “‘What have I done to make you behave like this?’” (88).

Recognizing that her violent efforts had driven her mother to madness, rather than understanding, Joan, with the support of her Aunt Lou’s two-thousand-dollar inheritance that she receives after losing one hundred pounds, escapes her self-injurious eating habits and family home and almost immediately reclaims her creativity. During her first night away from home, Joan lodges at the Royal York and is inspired by the hotel’s “fairyland of nineteenth-century delights” to “write an elegant note on the aristocratic stationary” (136). Yet the recently liberated Joan, fearing to retrace her earlier traumatic experiences with artistic expression, creates a projected identity as a survival strategy against the Red Shoes Syndrome that enables her to pursue her creativity in a society that has taught her the deadly consequences of such an endeavor. In the words of Eleonora Rao, Joan’s writing “allows her to explore a plural subjectivity and it is her writing that will enable her to live through this division, this split” (“Margaret” 142). Similar to Penelope, who, in The Penelopiad, conceals her transgressions by displaying them openly, Joan learns to keep her artist identity a secret by projecting it out into the open, and further manages, paradoxically, to escape the destructive influence of her mother by manifesting Frances’s
desire that she “change into someone else” (55). Yet the identity of Louisa K. Delacourt that Joan projects to publish her Costume Gothics while in England denotes Joan’s reliance, more broadly, upon the multiple inheritances from her Aunt Lou, rather than those of her mother, her desire to “be free not to be [her]self” without becoming “anything too different or startling” (139). Taking her cue from other female artists, including Joan Crawford, whose “real name was Lucille LeSueur” (42), her raucous and defiant Aunt Lou, who performs as the public face for a health guide on female puberty in which her image appears “smiling maternally … professionally” (85), and even the “inventive” (44) Miss Flegg, whose solution to problems is to create a “special, new person” (48), Joan creates a “second self” (137) that offers her vicarious access to her art and enables her to write fictions that, she later learns, are a vital “escape for the writer as well as the reader” (155).

Similar to the manner in which she conceives of her readers desperately turning to her romances, “neatly packaged like … painkillers” and consumed “quickly and discreetly” (34) to provide the necessary escape from reality, Joan imagines her projective identity as a liberating and discrete space that enables her to engage her creativity secretly while in her everyday life pursuing the conventional dreams of “sett[ing] down somewhere … hav[ing] children” (213) that she has been taught to value. Yet Shannon Hengen’s characterization of Joan’s romance writing as a “vulnerable … position” (Margaret 67) suggests that Joan’s solution to the problem of her creativity is more tenuous than she initially imagines. To the extent that Joan imagines her creative self, her “shadowy twin,” existing in “that other world” (246) psychically apart from her own, claiming that she had “always tried to keep [her] two
names and identities as separate as possible” (33), she mistakes the degree to which she is profoundly affected by the prejudices against, and obstacles inhibiting, female creativity that she continues to encounter as a grown woman. During her English affair with Paul, who presumes that all women “‘believe that life is babies and sewing’” (158), Joan is initially able to keep her two lives separate and thus deflect the derogations launched by her lover that women artists are “wise” to doubt their creative abilities and to “not delude [themselves] with false hopes” (147). While on one hand she feigns “ha[ving] no talent” (147), with the other Joan is able to complete her first novel, *The Lord of Chesney Chase*, by spending her afternoons researching alone in the costume galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Yet shortly after disclosing the source of her independent income to Paul, thereby evincing her inability to entirely dissociate from her projected identity, Joan is forced to admit the unstable divide between her ostensibly independent worlds. Paul’s now more fervent abasements of her writing as “cheap and frivolous” begin to affect Joan on a personal level, leading her to concede that she was not “a serious writer” and that she finds “other people’s versions of reality very influential” (160). While living, or as she terms it, “playing house” (216), with Arthur Foster, the dangerous permeability between Joan’s two identities is again made evident when she relates how the troubles faced by Louisa fail to remain externalized and begin resonating in her everyday life as Joan: “As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right … But if I was cut off, if I couldn’t work at my current Costume Gothic, I would be mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry” (213).

Deeply unsettled by the pervious boundaries surrounding her creative world, Joan looks to the spiritual realm to conjoin her bifurcated self. The practice of automatic
writing that Joan is introduced to during her visits to the Jordan Chapel is proclaimed by Reverend Leda Sprott as a means to contact the “other side,” which she later claims is a place “where all the final reconciliations will take place” (204). Similar to the Virgin of Lost Things in Cat’s Eye, who, according to Molly Hite, is “above all an agent of restoration … who redresses estrangement and truncation” (“Optics” 146), automatic writing bears the promise of unity for Joan, and affords her an opportunity to heal her fragmentation. Despite Leda’s intuition of Joan’s “Great powers” (112) for this practice, however, Joan’s experimentation with automatic writing disappoints both Leda’s and her own expectations and ultimately perpetuates, rather than resolves, the problem of her divided worlds. While the title, “Lady Oracle,”146 given to the collection of poems Joan produces through automatic writing symbolizes how she pursues this form of writing as a means of reconciling her conventionally female and creative selves, the enduring separation and incompatibility between these two realms is apparent in the ruptured line that occurs in Section Five of the collection, in which Joan offers the description of a “blank lady oracle” (226).

During her voyages to the other side of the mirror, Joan finds herself “walking along a corridor … I was going to find someone. I needed to find someone” (220), motivated by the belief that she would discover “the truth or word or person that was mine, that was waiting for me” (221). Yet the dissociated creative self that Joan seeks to reclaim constantly eludes her, leaving her unable to “get to the end of the corridor” (222), and the psychic space that she enters through automatic writing quickly becomes sinister rather than restorative, threatening to trap her “in the midst of darkness, unable to move” (223). More importantly, the words that Joan inscribes during such experiments further
alienate her from her creative self and portend her return to violent tactics. In her various poetic imaginings of deadly “icicle teeth” (226), the words “‘throat,’ ‘knife,’ ‘heart’,” and an “enormously powerful” but “unhappy” woman (my emphasis 222), Joan evinces how her automatic writing does not facilitate her progression beyond her divided self, but rather, her regression to the troubled and violent spaces of her past, wherein she evokes powerful images that revolve around eating and the harm it does to the body when done to excess. The collection of poems that ultimately emerges from her automatic writing bears a “half-likeness” to Joan that “ma[kes] [her] uncomfortable,” and the lines that she produces “without being conscious of [writing]” (220) seem to constitute a parody of the writing process, since, as Atwood explains, “writing is not like having dreams. It’s not that unconscious. It’s much more deliberate” (“A Question” 48). As such, Joan half-heartedly attempts to further dissociate from her creative gestures by publishing her collection using the projected identity of Joan Foster that she identifies as a collation of “Arthur’s name” and “[her] own” (232), indicating once again Joan’s reluctance to create a projective identity that is “too different or startling,” while further revealing how her efforts to coalesce her disparate selves have ended in their further division. Julie Fenwick explains that this fragmentation results “largely from [Joan’s] need to conceal from others … aspects of her personality that she believed they would find unacceptable” (61); however, Joan’s discomfort with the unheimlich qualities of her poetry suggests how the goal of her fragmentation is two-fold, aiming to delude both others, and herself.

Shortly after Joan’s publicity interview with Barry Finkle on Afternoon Hot Spot “Lady Oracle” becomes an astounding success, yet the numerous accolades and attentions Joan subsequently receives intimate how others attempt to wrestle control of
her projected artist identity and the exegesis of her art. In describing “Lady Oracle” as a work within the masculine tradition of “Rod McKuen and Kahlil Gibran” (238), Joan’s readers sever her from her female tradition that includes Aunt Lou, whose attempts at automatic writing enable her to produce “a few letters” (113), and Leda Sprott before her. In other words, while Frank Davey optimistically characterizes Joan as one who “believes that she can step outside of social codes, whether class or gender based” (“Atwood” 234), such a depiction of Joan as escape artist overlooks the manner in which her artist constructions escape from her, forcing her to relinquish authorial control. Ironically defeated by her success in the media, Joan reflects upon what has become of her projected self in the hands of others: “it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I’d never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences … She wanted to kill me and take my place” (250-1). This sense of being haunted by one’s dissociated identity calls to mind Freud’s description of how that which is projected outwards “returns from without” as an externalized threat to the self, and adds layers of meaning to Barry’s trite description of “Lady Oracle” as a “runaway bestseller” (my emphasis 237).

Contributing to Joan’s sense that she has lost control over her artist projection are the numerous ways in which her dissociated identity is forcibly thrust back upon her. Making the easy connection between Joan and the “Lady Oracle” poet that Joan has irresolutely attempted to conceal, and retracing the connective lines between the individual and her projection that dissociative strategies are supposed to render indiscernible (but that for Joan never are), various male readers assume Joan’s
autobiographical intensions in “Lady Oracle.” Resembling the autobiographical bias that Atwood satirizes in *The Blind Assassin* by prolonging her readers’ belief that Iris’s *The Blind Assassin* novel is Laura’s true account of her affair with Alex Thomas, Joan’s friend Sam, claiming he is “not a metaphor man” (235), reads “Lady Oracle” as a gloss on Joan’s troubled marriage and her illicit affair. Following his “displeased” (227) discovery of her artistry, Arthur’s similar preconception in reading the collection is evident by the manner in which he treats Joan “as though [she’d] committed some unpardonable but unmentionable sin” (235). Even the Royal Porcupine initially mistakes Joan for her poetic subject when he asks, “‘Are you Lady Oracle?’” (238), although it is likely that his query is posed ironically at this point to highlight the subtending bias in interpretations of women’s art. Lamenting her failed governance over her projected selves and her inability to “turn off [her] out-of-control fantasies” (251), Joan is plagued by her increased visibility and exposure and admits the futility of “thinking you’re invisible if you aren’t” (12).

Recognizing her failure to conjoin or control her projected identities and the impossibility of living without them, Joan seeks the means to be completely freed from her multiple selves and her life of evasion, soon arriving at the solution that she could “[pretend] to die so [she] could live” (315). Ironically, Joan’s final attempt to escape the deadly teleology of the Red Shoes Syndrome by feigning her death in Lake Ontario is interpreted by the media as her victimization by it. In reading the newspaper coverage of her death, she learns that she had “been shoved into the ranks of those other unhappy ladies … who’d been killed by a surfeit of words” (313). Yet similar to the voices from beyond the grave in the opening lines of “This is a Photograph of Me” (*Circle*) and *The
Journals of Susanna Moodie, Joan’s insistence that she “planned [her] death carefully … to be neat and simple” (7) is a testament to her survival, and to her efforts to untangle herself from what Cooke terms “the maze-like series of identities she has created” (Critical 86). Attempting to conceive of a new life for herself, Joan describes her rented flat in Terremoto, Italy as the “Other Side” (309), thus reflecting the way in which she envisions her feigned death, like automatic writing, as a means to collect together her “dangling threads and loose ends” (293). Yet similar to her earlier efforts to evade her difficulties rather than confront them directly, Joan begins this new life with a further act of dissociation; as she explains to her landlord Mr. Vitroni, she is a richly endowed woman pursued by “someone … trying to kill [her]” (326). This pursued woman and her pursuer, however, are not entirely a fabrication (indeed, none of Joan’s projections is entirely disconnected from reality) and her assailant can be read not as the invasive reporter Joan attacks with a Cinzano bottle, but as Joan herself, whose on-going attempts at self-denial lead her to feel increasingly as if she is “getting rid of a body, the corpse of someone [she’d] killed” (20). Paradoxically, her projective efforts that began as a means of self-defense against the fated script of the Red Shoes Syndrome in the end become a danger to her sense of self and security.

Resolving to see herself as a figure of multiplicity rather than a murderer, Joan ceases to struggle against her diversity and submits to viewing herself as characterized by fluidity and variegation. While Joan had earlier been influenced by Brown Owl’s admonition that she “‘must learn to control [her]self’” (58) and the ironically “small, crumbly voice” of her fortune cookie conscience telling her “It is often best to be oneself” (231), she eventually moves beyond essentialized understandings of selfhood,
recognizing that she will never “be a very tidy person” (345), and learns to view herself as an intersection of personalities, stories and preferences. In addition to destabilizing the presuppositions of the Red Shoes Syndrome, which configure the female artist as wholly invested in her internecine feminine and creative selves, Joan’s valuing each of her various façades as “a version of the truth” (92) undermines Freudian theories of projection. Through her understanding of herself as an “assemblage” (211) of simultaneous selves, and even in her recognition that “there were as many of Arthur as there were of me” (211), Joan proposes that there remains no individual ego to defend, no essential self for her dissociative efforts to shelter from the destructive effects of internal conflict. Giving concrete expression to Rao’s observation that *Lady Oracle* ultimately “emphasises the liberating aspects of a multiple, plural subjectivity” and “endorses process and change” (“Margaret” 133), the colony of ants that gather in the small puddle of sugar water that Joan shapes “to see [her] name spelled out for [her] in ants” (21) suggests that Joan is perhaps no more than the sum of her many components, yet cannot be reduced to any one of them.

***

With her publication of *Cat’s Eye* more than a decade later, Atwood continues her examination of the Red Shoes Syndrome and the dissociative techniques female artists employ to avoid its tragic end. Situated generically as a *Künstlerroman* and fictive autobiography, *Cat’s Eye* is narrated by the middle-aged visual artist Elaine Risley who, not surprisingly, is given the name “Joan” in the early drafts (“The Ravine”), thus suggesting the conceptual continuity between Atwood’s female artists despite their working in different media. Demonstrating her further similarity to Joan, whose travel
occasions her looking back on life, Elaine uses her return to Toronto for her retrospective exhibition at the “Sub-Versions” art gallery as an opportunity to explore her formative years. During these explorations, Elaine describes how the androgynous behaviors and dress that characterized her childhood summers in the forests, where her father’s entomological work required him to wear “heavy pants tucked into the tops of woolen work socks” and her mother’s attire “wasn’t all that different,” contrast with the rigid and deeply gendered spaces of Toronto, where Elaine’s family spent their winters and where her “mother’s legs … appeared, sheathed in nylons with seams up the backs” (34). Despite the ostensible avant-gardism of urban life, the young Elaine while living in Toronto is forced to contend with the nineteenth-century double discourse of women as angels or monstrous madwomen first articulated by Gilbert and Gubar,\(^{150}\) who discern that such figurations create an “obsessive imagery of confinement,” forcing female artists to “feel trapped and sickened both by suffocating alternatives and by the culture that created them” (64). Moreover, the self-destructive behavior that Elaine turns to in response to the seeming untenability of her becoming an artist, and her similar failures to meet impossible female conventions, suggests her dangerous encounters with the Red Shoes Syndrome. Confronted with the impossibility of her subject position, Elaine faces an existential crisis that is narrowly escaped only through the use of projective strategies that ultimately prolong, rather than resolve, her feelings of nihility and that continue until she radically re-conceptualizes her understanding of nothingness as a place of new beginning.

The childhood games of staring that Elaine and her girlfriend Cordelia play in the opening pages identify Elaine as one who engages her world through her vision. She is,
as Judith McComb writes, a “seer-narrator” who “sees, from early childhood on, in vivid right-brain images of shapes and colours; a self that will in adulthood become the artist” (9). This privileging of visual perception is made evident in her evaluating drawings not on their accuracy but on their use of color (35), her developing ability to “see in the dark” that her brother Stephen tells her is an invaluable faculty, since “You never know when you might need to do this” (26), and her fascination with the Brownie box-camera that she receives for her eighth birthday. However, the first image that Elaine captures with her new camera—which bears a striking resemblance to the photograph of the young Atwood used as the frontispiece of The Door (2007)—is a portrait of herself standing outside of her family’s motel cabin appearing “as if [she’d] been put there in front of the door and told to stand still” (27). Unlike Atwood’s portrayal of photography in The Edible Woman as a means to empower the artist, enabling Peter to “[pull] the trigger” and fix Marian “indissolubly in that gesture … unable to move or change” (272), the adult Elaine’s interpretation of her early photograph evinces how she regards her early gestures of visual expression as coincident with others’ demand for her obsequience. Elaine’s resentment towards this imposition upon her artistic vision is similarly demonstrated by her childhood self when she re-examines the photograph one month after it is taken and views her captured and postured image as a “shrunken, ignorant version of [her]self” (55), thus offering an early indication of how Elaine learns to resent and attack herself for falling victim to the proscriptions of others.

More precisely, such reflections make clear that Elaine’s artist identity is cultivated alongside her growing understanding of the societal disdain for female artists. The deterrents against female creativity, writ small in Carol Smeath’s “piano teacher
hit[ting] her fingers with a ruler if she gets a note wrong” (48), are rendered more visible in the general perception of the creative homeless women on the Toronto streetcar as lunatics. With their “power[s] of invention” (5) and their “hats that look like stage props… bizarre costumes” (5), such individuals are regarded as madwomen, a designation that highlights the continuity between Victorian conventions of female deviancy and those of Toronto in the 1940s, and Toronto’s rigorous efforts to reinstate traditional gender roles and a sense of order in the aftermath of World War II. Moreover, the madwoman artist, described by Gilbert and Gubar as a carrier of “unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts” (29), betrays society’s repudiation of female inventiveness that the young Elaine is conversely drawn towards, yet learns to approach with trepidation. Later, as a middle-aged artist, Elaine acknowledges the incredible durability of this bias against women’s art (and thus the dangers inherent in her pursuits) in reflecting how, “With a slight push, a slip over some ill-defined edge,” her public image could be transformed into that of “a bag lady” (386). The psychological violence of Elaine’s girlfriends, and of Cordelia in particular, that aims to punish Elaine for her stepping outside of the impossibly narrow path of feminine behavior signals to Elaine that she is under constant surveillance, and instills in her the belief that femininity means strict obedience to a set of rules ensuring “no end to imperfection … to doing things the wrong way” (138). Yet while “Letting yourself go is an alarming notion” (277) for most women, it a necessary lesson for the artist; according to Atwood, art is inherently intractable and “uncontrollable,” and the artist is one who “see[s] life as complex and mysterious, with ironies and loose ends, not as a tidy system” (“If You Can’t” 21). Similar to the women on the streetcar who refuse to “[resign] themselves” (4), Elaine
learns that her artist’s vision is best expressed when she risks pursuing divergent ways of viewing the world, and recognizes, as her art teacher Josef Hrbik explains, that the “bowdy is not pretty like a flower” (272).

If the imaginative woman in Elaine’s urban society is widely regarded as a figure of madness and aberration, then the ideal female is perceived as an angel, a chimerical figure Atwood imagines is free from “human failings” and devoid of “any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise” (“The Curse” 226). Similarly described by Gilbert and Gubar as the “antithetical mirror image” (28) of the monstrous madwoman, the angel appears in the narrative not as a celestial but as a distinctly domestic and virtuous figure most clearly embodied in Mrs. Smeath, whom Elaine later depicts in Rubber Plant: The Ascension surrounded by angel stickers, “laundered little girls in white, with rag-set curly hair” (86). Typically encountered by the young Elaine wearing print housedresses and resting on the living room chesterfield so that Elaine was never certain if she was “still alive” or not, Mrs. Smeath becomes embalmed in Elaine’s memory as one who was forever “lying unmoving, like something in a museum” (58). Such recollections not only suggest the antiquated nature of the angelic ideal and the lack of individuality it ensures, but further point to its associations with death that, like Victorian conventions of female suicide, forcibly relegate death to the female realm where it can be objectively scrutinized by men. As Gilbert and Gubar similarly argue, the female ideal of “‘contemplative purity’ evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave” (25). Further emphasizing the defunct existence promised by such restrictive female conventions and Atwood’s ongoing deconstruction of angel iconographies are the parallels Atwood draws between the angel of the house and the angel of suicide she
describes elsewhere in her mini-fiction “An Angel.” More precisely, Elaine’s recollection of Mrs. Smeath as one whose skin “looks rubbed raw as if scrubbed with a potato brush” (57) and her use of egg tempura to compose this rendition mirror Atwood’s description of the “angel of suicide,” who “has no face to speak of … the face of a grey egg” (“An Angel”, Good 110), thus evincing Atwood’s sense that Mrs. Smeath’s submission to the female ideal is simultaneously her resignation to a form of death.¹⁵²

For Elaine, this threat of self-destruction likewise exists for the female artist who is unable to escape the feminine ideal, and is thus caught between desire and duty. Like Joan in Lady Oracle, who grows to treasure “images of [her]self exuding melting femininity and soft surrender” (140), Elaine acknowledges the influence her female peers and her immersion into an intensely gendered urban society has had upon her, conceding that she has begun “to want things [she’d] never wanted before: braids, a dressing-gown, a purse of [her] own” (54). Years later, the conventional greeting Elaine records on her answering machine, in which her voice is that of “an angel … placid and helpful” (41), further confirms to her that she has effectively internalized the female code. Yet discovering her place in this tradition for Elaine means recognizing the ways in which such female conventions conflict with her identity as an artist. Rendering problematic Laurie Vickroy’s isolation of Elaine as a figure who “develops as a woman artist with no known predecessors” and as “an outsider rebelling against traditional views,” Cordelia’s mother initially appears as an exemplary model for Elaine to emulate, a synthesis of both the female and artist worlds. Appearing to the young Elaine in a painting smock, “a smudge of apple-green on her cheek,” Cordelia’s mother maternally greets Elaine during one of her visits by offering her a “cookie … in the tin” (117). Elaine’s notice, however,
of her “smile of an angel,” the unsettling manner in which she “drifts by,” and even Cordelia’s referring to her mother as “Mummie” (117), indicates the failure of Cordelia’s mother to balance the roles of artist and domestic angel. Moreover, Susan Strehle’s reading of Cordelia’s mother as one whose “object-status” has limited her to “produc[ing] ‘pretty’ things to hang on the wall” (169) identifies that both she and her art have suffered greatly as a result of this impossible balance.

Pulled asunder by her simultaneous impulses towards artistry and conventional femininity, Elaine’s sense of self is increasingly destabilized, and she soon rationalizes that if she cannot be either of the two identities she has relied upon to define herself, then she is, in the words of her pre-pubescent self, “nothing.” Demonstrating her resemblance to Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale, who similarly imagines herself as “Zilch” (172), and to Zenia in The Robber Bride, who is described as “nothing” (78), Elaine consequently turns to terms of negation in an attempt to define herself: “Nothing … It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all” (41). Here, her desperate attempts to use simile to represent her sense of herself as a non-being clearly illustrate the complete lack of signification she feels within, and thus her need to draw on outside constructs in her efforts at self-representation. Yet the empty vehicles that she grasps at in creating such figurations merely reflect back her feelings of nihility and futility. This state of nothingness that Elaine confronts, compounded by Cordelia’s various abuses of Elaine that “made [her] believe [she] was nothing” (199), and inadvertently by her father’s conservationist philosophies which teach Elaine that while living in the forest she should “make it look as if [she hasn’t] been there at all” (22), 153 results in Elaine’s decreasing ability to use language. The morning after her
Sunday dinner with the Smeath family—during which she was once again trapped between her need to obey the rules of feminine etiquette and her inclinations to see the absurdity of her world—Elaine’s teacher, Miss Lumley, observes the deteriorated state of Elaine’s handwriting: “the letters are no longer round and beautiful, but spidery, frantic, and disfigured with blots of black rusty ink” (127). Similarly, Elaine’s lack of interest in her mother’s alphabet soup and its edible letters, which she used to arrange into words and even her own name but that now “taste like nothing” (136), demonstrates her increasing aphasia and the Lacanian connection between language and selfhood which insists, “Man [sic] speaks … but it is because the symbol has made him man [sic]” (Lacan 65). This emphasis on the primacy of language to subjectivity identifies that while Elaine may draw on visual rather than linguistic media to express her artistic vision and, as Atwood intimates, hold a “distrust [of] words up to a point” (“Struggling” 176), her selfhood remains inextricably linked to the symbolic order, where the deterioration of one entails her disintegrating facility with the other.

The various acts of self-directed violence that Elaine soon begins to inflict upon her body initially appear as testament to her efforts to destroy the body that lingers on after her sense of existential death and her finally falling victim to the fatal prognostic of the Red Shoes Syndrome. The compulsion to destroy her body through acts such as burning her hand on the toaster’s “red-hot grid” (119) frequently overwhelms Elaine, and while she is at times able to resist such urges, she more often submits to them. In a habit that she continues throughout her childhood, Elaine peels the skin away from her feet in a manner that resembles a ritualistic practice: “I would begin with the big toes. I would bend my foot up and bite a small opening in the thickest part of the skin, on the bottom,
along the outside edge. Then, with my fingernails … I would pull the skin off in narrow strips. I would do the same to the other big toe, then to the ball of each foot, the heel of each. I would go down as far as the blood” (113-4). Such recurrent attacks upon her body enable her to commit to memory this self-destructive act, and she is soon able to peel the skin away from her feet and fingers “without looking, by touch” (118) and “in the dark” (181). Appropriately, the hands and feet that Elaine targets in her self-harm rituals are those necessary to the dancer in *The Red Shoes* film and to her own visual art. Yet it is soon apparent that Elaine’s self-injuries are performed to a very different end than that anticipated by the Red Shoes Syndrome. That is, Elaine’s repeated gestures of self-harm are not used to ensure her annihilation, but rather, her self-sustenance during moments when she is overwhelmed by the threat of non-existence, thus reflecting what Vigdis Broch-Due observes as the capacity of violence to become “a process of identification and differentiation” (19). In this regard, Elaine’s efforts to dis-figure her body simultaneously re-figure the symptomatology of the Red Shoes Syndrome and the cultural belief that violence against the self is invariably self-destructive. As Elaine explains, the “pain gave [her] something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold onto” (114) when her disintegrating selfhood was no longer adequate in providing this necessary stability. Later, she adds that her self-destructive acts are a way of reclaiming control, and “of delaying time, slowing it down” (119), thereby postponing her encounters with the hostile urban society outside her family home.

The victuals of self-destruction that Elaine paradoxically enacts to save herself from the threat of non-existence are, however, ultimately inadequate to mitigate or solve
her existential crisis. Surrounded by the widespread attempts of a city (and, more broadly, a nation) to reinstate social order in the wake of global unrest, Elaine’s on-going war with herself and with her female peers over her inability to imbibe the female ideal exposes how freedom from one kind of threat can incite others, as well as the dangers of accepting her mother’s presupposition that “war will never come here” (24). The suicidal gestures that Elaine eventually deliberates in daydreaming about “eating the deadly nightshade berries from the bushes … drinking the Javex out of the skull-and-crossbones bottle … jumping off the bridge” (155), or “throw[ing] [her]self in front of the Princess’s car” (160), threaten to become a reality when she begins to imagine death as the ultimate immunity, a state where “No one can get at [you]” (144), and to practice self-asphyxiation as a new way of stepping sideways “out of time” (171). Reaching her nadir in the bottom of the ravine near her home, Elaine is forced by Cordelia to descend a steep hillside ending in a barely frozen creek to retrieve her hat, and her subsequent fall through the creek’s surface and into the frozen waters below marks the point at which she succumbs to her feelings of nihilility. Rather than responding to her fall with an attempt at survival, Elaine imagines that she will become “dissolved” into the “water made from … dead people” that rushes around her: “I will be a dead person, peaceful and clear, like them” (188). Similar to Duncan’s submission in The Edible Woman to the wintry Toronto ravine that allows him to feel “as near as possible to nothing,” and that he describes as “close to absolute zero” (292), Elaine surrenders to her feelings of self-dissolution in the ravine and is only narrowly saved by a Virgin Mary figure who beckons her to safety, and who she initially perceives as Cordelia (189).
Following this pivotal scene, in which Elaine reaches the depths of existential despair, she turns to projective mechanisms as a means of self-preservation and begins to cast her conflicted selfhood onto Cordelia, a strategy that is explained by both metaphysical and psychoanalytic frameworks, the former of which have taught Elaine that “The body is pure energy” (240) and that “energy [can be] passed between” (233) individuals. In “Living in Space,” an uncollected essay written five years before the publication of *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood theorizes the relationship between space and time by detailing how, prior to the child’s awareness of time, she regards herself as a discrete entity that is demarcated by the surfaces of her physical body. However, Atwood suggests that when the child consciously enters time and begins to recognize the inconstancy of her world, she discovers that she and her human and non-human surroundings are “made space[s] and can therefore be re-made” (“Living”). Atwood adds that “From then on … [the child] can begin to re-create, [her]self among other things, by rearranging [her] relationship to the tangible conditions of [her] existence,” recognizing how “the space [she] takes up does not end with the outer surface of [her] skin” (“Living”). This exegesis clarifies how Elaine’s abiding Cordelia’s imperative to “count to a hundred … Before coming up” (187) from the ravine forces her to consciously enter into temporality, and thus recognize her ability to alter and manipulate her identity, and the individuals and objects in her environment. In moving beyond her earlier misunderstanding of time as constancy and her belief that “Time will go on, in the same way, endlessly” (186), Elaine gains an awareness of the mutability of herself and of her world, and is consequently enabled to extend herself into her surroundings through projection. Elaine’s looking at her world in this new way, evident in her notice of the ravine bridge
that is now “different-looking” and of lights “not like any … [she’s] ever seen before” (189), further reflects Atwood’s insistence that “Revision, of our spaces as of everything else, is re-vision: a way of seeing something anew, in a new light” (“Living”).

Yet Elaine’s opting for self-dissociation, rather than self-dissolution, can be alternately read through psychoanalytic frames. The psychological image of a woman passing through a mirrored surface to enter into an alternative space frequently appears in Atwood’s fiction to signify entry into a shadow self, suggesting how Elaine’s fall beneath the creek’s icy surface similarly denotes her passing from one body into a projective other. Divorcing herself from her creativity, Elaine relinquishes her interests in her camera, which she has “ha[sn’t] taken any pictures with … for a long time” (203), and foregoes her efforts to abide feminine conventions by developing an “amused disdain” (235) for collections of “china and housewares” (234), summarily rejecting both realms by favoring a pair of “flat ballerina shoes … that scuff as [she] walk[s] and bulge out at the sides” (234). Yet as these modes of identification fade from Elaine, she increasingly notes their presence in Cordelia, including her “tak[ing] up moderate pinks … going on diets” and her “performance” (243) around boys. Through this strategy of dissociation, Elaine places onto an external figure the discordant elements she feels are unsustainable within herself, afterwards suggesting her revised relationship to nihility by claiming that “Nothing hurts anymore” (189). Yet the impossibility of Cordelia making a similar claim is ensured by the numerous acts of brutality Elaine begins to inflict upon her. Moreover, while much has been said of Cordelia’s childhood attacks against Elaine and their deleterious effect, relatively little has been said of Elaine’s adolescent assaults on Cordelia, and few have ventured beyond retributive explanations to speculate on why
Elaine commits such acts. Addressing this critical oversight, this discussion argues that Cordelia is a figure to be destroyed by Elaine to the extent that she becomes an embodiment of the elements Elaine has rejected and distanced herself from, reflecting McComb’s observation of how the novel’s female characters cast “projections of … horror onto women” (16). Aiming her “verbal danger” (234), “mean mouth” (235) and psychological “savagery” (231) at Cordelia, Elaine quickly develops into an agent of externally directed violence that continues, on some level, to represent the harm Elaine had enacted, and might otherwise be compelled to further enact, against herself.

Yet Elaine’s use of violent offense as an attempt at ego-defense ultimately results, as might be expected, in a perpetuation rather than a cessation of her feelings of nothingness and of lost selfhood. Appearing more than ever during this projective phase as an empty vessel drained of its vital contents, Elaine’s narrative “I” appears to remain constant only on account of her narrating such events retrospectively from her somewhat reclaimed sense of selfhood in the present.160 Signs of Elaine’s paradoxical absence from her physical presence variously appear in her observation, while looking into Cordelia’s sunglasses, that she is not reflected by, but “There … in her mirror eyes” (my emphasis 303),161 and in her repeated failures of memory (108, 200, 232, 333); if Elaine’s aging mother is “no less alive because dying” (396), then the converse might be said of Elaine. Yet Elaine’s graveyard storytelling with Cordelia years after her ravine incident comes closest to revealing the truth of her hollowness and her growing dependency on Cordelia as a figure imbued with her sense of identity. While considering the ways in which the body can continue to appear alive, growing hair and fingernails, for a time after its demise, Elaine explains to Cordelia, “I’m really dead. I’ve been dead for years” (233),
and characterizes herself as a vampire who relies on the vitality and blood of another. This borrowed blood, however, does not give Elaine new life, but merely perpetuates her death-like state, and when Cordelia finally disappears from Elaine’s life years later following her internment at the Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home, Elaine is left with “nothingness washing over [her] like a sluggish wave” (372) and attempts suicide by cutting her wrist with a razor. The unsettling image the young Elaine witnesses at the Conversat of the embryonic twins suspended in formaldehyde, their veins injected with colored rubber to render visible how “their blood systems are connected” (169), might have offered Elaine a powerful portent of the fatal ends in store for those whose lives depend on the blood of another.

Atwood’s representation of Chris Beecham’s and Griff’s suicides in *Life Before Man* and *The Robber Bride*, respectively, and her suggestion of Brian the Still-Hunter’s similar end in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* illuminate her sense that suicide is far from an exclusively female practice, although Elaine’s surviving her attempt at her life intimates how some women are more fortunate than their male counterparts, or perhaps how women’s means of suicide are typically less extreme. In any event, Elaine, following her failed suicide, begins to re-conceptualize her familiar feeling of nothingness as a fertile starting point for her new life and relocates to Vancouver. In recognizing how, in the words of R.D. Lane, “Zero has a dual potential. It can be viewed simply as nothing or the point at which all possibilities exist” and how “Out of nothing can come absence and presence, negation and knowledge, denial and acceptance, lack and fulfillment” (81), Elaine is enabled to “Gradually … grow back, into [her] hands” (377), and to return to her painting. Yet she does so at the cost of growing apart from her female community,
thus indicating her choosing one dimension of her identity over another and her attempts to return to the androgyny that characterized her life in the woods prior to her family’s move into the city. This decision has left readers such as William French to characterize *Cat’s Eye* as a work of post-feminist fiction that “confound[s] Atwood’s feminist admirers,”¹⁶³ and further illuminates the difficulty of establishing a space for violent women within feminist discourses.¹⁶⁴ Like Joan, who remains “wary of any group composed entirely of women” (*Lady Oracle* 87), Elaine admits that “Sisterhood is a difficult concept for [her]” (345),¹⁶⁵ and attempts to un-learn the externally imposed rules of femininity that she was forced to adopt at a relatively late age,¹⁶⁶ rather than assimilated into. As a result, Elaine imagines herself as “an exception” (280) to the dicta and challenges presented to women, including that of the Red Shoes Syndrome and the archetype of the female artist as madwoman, both of which she learns to confront not with submission, but with satire: “If I cut off my ear, would the market value [of my paintings] go up? Better still, stick my head in the oven, blow out my brains. What rich art collectors like to buy … is a little vicarious craziness” (86). Yet her attempts to place herself outside of potentially pernicious female codes and communities are never entirely successful, given that her paintings and creative vision emerge from her ongoing tensions with these same realities, and that the spaces of creation are frequently indistinguishable from those of destruction. While Elaine falsely claims that she uses women as art objects because she adopts the tradition of “Painters paint[ing] women” (90), the interconnectedness between Elaine’s artist and female identities reveals the complexity and enduring quality of these elements of her selfhood, and suggests how the fluid
identity that Joan achieves by the end of *Lady Oracle* is not so easily procured by all of Atwood’s female artists.

***

In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood returns to the artist’s coming of age and fictional autobiography traditions she earlier employs, thereby again encouraging us to think, according to Coral Ann Howells, “about the terms by which identity is constructed” ("Transgressing" 144). Yet in this instance, the narrative is variously hybridized by the influence of the “villainess [novel]” (Cooke *Critical* 137), detective fiction, science fiction, historiographic metafiction, Gothicism, realism, and the confessional memoir, betokening how Atwood intends for the identity of the artist to be more difficult to discern in this narrative than in her earlier works. Beginning with the first-person narration of Iris Chase and ending with her voice from beyond the grave, the novel unfolds through three overlapping narrative lines: a frame text, in which the eighty-two year old Iris records her life story and *ipso facto* offers a chronicle of twentieth-century Canada, a second narrative line in which the modernist novella “The Blind Assassin,” ostensibly written by Laura Chase, appears, and a third that offers the speculative fictions told by the unnamed male lover in “The Blind Assassin.” Through this double *mise en abîme*, the contexts and content of women’s literary art are explored in a fashion similar to that of *Lady Oracle*, in which the divide between fiction and reality is uncertain and thus repeatedly transgressed. The further resemblance of the two narratives in their opening reference to a female artist’s suicide that is not what it at first appears additionally suggests that Atwood is picking up a narrative thread that she began more than two decades prior in her description of Joan’s staged drowning in Lake Ontario.
More precisely, while Laura’s fatal drive off a bridge initially appears as conclusive evidence that proves her falling victim to the Red Shoes Syndrome, it more aptly begins the story of how Iris, the true author of “The Blind Assassin,” avoids this end through acts of displacement. Faced with the challenge of negotiating her creative aspirations within a society that offers women a circumscribed and inhibitive relationship to art, Iris, like Joan and Elaine before her, turns to dissociative designs as a means of self-preservation. Yet unlike Atwood’s earlier representations of projective strategies, which remain conversant with Freudian theory, *The Blind Assassin* marks a rhetorical shift towards the Girardian displacement of threat onto a sacrificial victim, thus further suggesting that the Red Shoes Syndrome is not an inescapable fate for the female artist, but a means to explore her capacity for divergent thought.

If *Lady Oracle* marks Atwood’s attempt to depict the female artist’s looking backwards from early adulthood, and *Cat’s Eye* the female artist’s proleptic narration from middle age, then *The Blind Assassin* is Atwood’s effort to capture the elderly female writer as she contemplates her artistry and life entire, from before her birth to beyond her death. Yet the transparency of Iris’s artist identity has been disputed by critics such as Alan Robinson and Earl Ingersoll, the latter of whom characterizes Iris as an “unacknowledged” author within the three intersecting narratives. Such a designation, however, overlooks the manner in which the aging Iris’s identity as artist is apparent early on through her self-reflexive descriptions of herself writing her memoirs, which she initially imagines is for an audience of “Perhaps … no one” (43). While she later identifies her intended reader as her granddaughter Sabrina, Iris’s early claim, which suggests her lacking a motive for diverging from the “truth” of events, disguises the
creative license she takes in recording history, and her tendency to offer “half-truth[s] at best” (38).

What is largely “unacknowledged,” or perhaps undisclosed, is the artistic inclination of the young Iris, given the aging Iris’s efforts to appear “upright and contained” (43) in her memoir, and to obscure her unseemly struggles with the world of female artistry that ultimately lead her to commit selfish and perfidious acts. Similar to the version of history offered by Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, which is intended to forestall recognition of her indirectly murderous behaviors, Iris’s lengthy frame narrative appears to tell all about her past, yet obscures much. Despite her efforts to remain “innocent until proven guilty” (210), evidence of Iris’s writerly identity seeps into the narrative through her “clumsy” fingers, and her pen that “wavers and rambles” (43),\(^{169}\) to reveal her deep sense of pleasure in receiving her first fountain pen at the age of thirteen: “how sleek it felt, how blue the ink made my fingers. It was made of Bakelite, with silver trim” (42). Similarly, Iris recalls her early delectation in exploring her Grandfather Benjamin’s library, with its “marble Medusa over the fireplace” (58) and sensuous leather-backed books with “titles stamped in dim gold” (154-5), although she attempts to conceal her pleasures by referring to such items as “obsolete Victorian splendours” and by highlighting Laura’s creativity in coloring in such books according to her “strange but very definite ideas about which colours were required” (157). Following her marriage to the industrial magnate Richard Griffen and her subsequent placement under the watchful eye of his sister Winifred, manifestations of Iris’s artistry become even less discernible, conveyed indirectly through the unnamed woman in “The Blind Assassin” (who we later learn is Iris’s representation of herself when with her lover Alex Thomas),\(^{170}\) and, in

147
Iris’s memoir, through gardening and thoroughly sanctioned performances of feminine composure. Winifred, cognizant of the importance of Iris’s appearance to Richard’s success and thus her own security, insists to Iris that she must “dress the part, no matter what” (235). Moreover, while the woman in “The Blind Assassin” highlights the advantages of rehearsed displays of “smoothness, coolness, blankness” (260), which enable her to conceal her affair from her family, Iris’s memoir highlights the disadvantages of such female performances, offering no trace of her extramarital involvements or the artistic expression it allows. Leaving unsatisfied her compulsion to “make something, from whatever unpromising materials” (296), such circumscribed uses of Iris’s creativity limit her to living a life as woman but not as artist. In other words, “Half a life” (479).

The societal prohibitions against the female artist that give rise to Iris’s transmuted expressions of creativity are evident in how the women of Port Ticonderoga are shaped into consumers, rather than producers, of art. Iris describes her Grandmother Adelia, whose “smooth as silk … cool as a cucumber” (59) appearance is perhaps less a performance than a genuine reflection of her assimilation of female conduct, as the figure whose conspicuous consumption of culture was expected to “refine” her husband Benjamin’s money “like oil” (59). A descendent of an established family, Adelia makes prudent selections of “authentic” pieces of statuary for the gardens, and of French mantelpieces, William Morris wallpaper, and imported Tristan and Iseult stained-glass windows for the interior. These purchases are intended to showcase the wealth and establishment of the Chase family, although the ambitiousness of such displays inadvertently reveal Avilion as a “merchant’s palace” (58) and Benjamin as among
Ontario high society’s *nouveau riche*. Like the domestic angel in *Cat’s Eye*, which conveys women’s traditional positioning as figures of moral authority, Adelia’s enculturation was believed to “make [her] better—a better person” (59), thus revealing the underlying constants informing the various proscriptive roles for women, and suggesting that the refinement Adelia symbolized was always in part a refinement of the soul.

Yet the distinction between the objects of art consumed by women and the women themselves is never entirely clear in Iris’s recollections, indicating how her artistry is further inhibited by the societal constructions of woman as *objet d’art*. More precisely, despite Adelia’s role in populating Avilion with refined, and thus refining, cultural items, Benjamin situates her amongst such objects as “concrete evidence” (60) of his civility, and discourages her from committing public displays of her bodily practices, such as eating, that prove otherwise (60). Substantiating Iris’s claims for the potential “tyranny of Art” (145), this reification of women’s bodies highlights Orbach’s observation that “women are schooled to relate to their bodies as their objects … in the marketplace of social relations” (70-1) and encourages women to think of themselves as devoid of the contemplative subjectivity necessary for the production of art. Yet it is not men alone who sustain this restrictive understanding of women and their relationship to art, but women themselves, who, according to Gilbert and Gubar, are capable of “‘kill[ing]’ themselves … into art objects” (25). Like Elaine, who perpetuates her fears of “turning into” (269) the objectified female body she has witnessed in her life drawing and Art and Archaeology classes by imagining herself to paint women in a similar manner, Iris speaks of herself in the third person and critiques her body as she
would a displeasing aesthetic object when examining her wedding photo: “A young woman in a white satin dress cut on the bias, the fabric sleek, with a train fanned around the feet like spilled molasses. There’s something gangly about the stance, the placement of the hips, the feet, as is her spine is wrong for this dress—too straight” (239). Elsewhere, in her description of a commissioned portrait of herself and Laura as children, Iris insists upon the interiority behind their representation by explaining how their expressions convey their fear of their father’s “threat and … disapproval” (160). The notable absence, however, of such underlying subjectivity in her description of her wedding photo suggests that she views her marriage to Richard, like Adelia’s betrothal to Benjamin, as an imperative to stop gazing outward at her world and to become an object that is gazed upon.

Nonetheless, Iris’s introduction to Callista Fitzsimmons, like Elaine’s exposure to Cordelia’s mother, initially suggests to her the possibility of negotiating a space between art and femininity, and renders Callista a beacon of hope for the young Iris: “I was in awe of Callista because she was an artist, and was consulted like a man, and strode around and shook hands like one as well, and smoked cigarettes in a short black holder, and knew about Coco Chanel” (147). Here, Iris’s praise for Callista lay not in her numerous adulations, but in her conjunctions, which signify Callista’s dexterity in bridging opposing realms that Iris had been taught could not be bridged. Yet Iris’s repeated exposure to others’ resentment towards Callista—including Reenie’s questioning her femininity by framing her as a figure of madness, “two bricks short of a load” (147), and Winifred’s doubting her artistic ability in describing her as “The one who thinks of herself as an artist” (my emphasis 391)—demonstrates to her that she had been deluded in
her early hopes. Iris’s witness to Callista’s subsequent efforts to disguise her femininity as “Cal” (185) further highlights how the female artist’s lack of belief in her creativity is often entrenched in, and communicated through, female lines. Indications of Iris’s tendency towards the Red Shoes Syndrome and self-directed bodily violence, seen in her efforts to remain “as sickly as [she] could for as long as possible” (441) while living with Richard, and in her contemplating suicide by jumping off the Jubilee Bridge (140), thus appear as her attempts to secure an immediate and individual solution to a long-standing societal problem. Similarly in “The Blind Assassin,” the woman longs for destruction, but for that of her mind rather than her body, “for amnesia, for oblivion … Immolation,” revealing her awareness that “The real danger comes from herself” (261).

Such impulses towards self-harm mark the ways in which Iris has variously imagined the obliteration of both her female body and her artist’s mind, and suggest that the past disclosed through Iris’s writing is also, as Hilde Staels writes, a “history of self-mutilation” (159).175

Yet Iris’s outliving nearly all of her kin, and her appearance in the frame narrative as “the only survivor” (218), suggests that her instincts are more for self-preservation than for self-annihilation. Numerous critics have looked to Iris’s writing of history as that of the Scheherazade combating her own mortality, thereby situating her art as both a motivation for her destruction and the means of her survival,176 yet little has been said of the way in which Iris turns to the projective mechanism of sacrifice as a means of warding off the threat of her dissolution brought on by her artist identity. More precisely, Iris’s use of Laura as a sacrificial figure through whom she can disencumber herself of her artistry and female captivity, and thus pass the violence of her self-destruction onto
another, reflects Girard’s understanding of how “violence is deflected and diffused in human society” (285), and how aggression, “When unappeased … seeks and always finds a surrogate victim” (2). This theory of sacrifice, explained by Richard Kearney as a “projection wherein some victimized outsider becomes the alleged carrier” (37) of a community’s disputes and by Terri Ginsberg as a “displacement and projection of meaning onto designated and particular … subjects” (281), was originally conceived by Girard as a social institution enabling a community threatened by internal conflict to ensure its perpetuity by casting its violence outwards. Girard argues that the sacrificed victim “diverts violence from its forbidden objectives within the community” (101), given that “Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object” (4).

Acknowledging the “Individualization” (101) of sacrificial processes as a later development, Girard concedes that sacrifice can similarly operate on the level of the individual, enabling one to side-step the deadly outcome of an internally divided self by selecting a surrogate victim, defined by Girard as one who lives “outside or on the fringes of society” (12) and who “submits to violence without provoking a reprisal” (86). This translation of the sacrificial mechanism into individual terms, however, complicates the gesture as a devotional act, and the matter of designating a deity to whom such sacrifices can be made. Can Iris, recognizing herself as a “false god” (The Blind 475), and her self-preservation be reasons enough for the violence of sacrifice within Girard’s framework, her survival a divine decree? Girard’s suggestion that there is “no object or endeavor in whose name a sacrifice cannot be made” (8) appears to indicates so. In her interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood explains, “Everybody has gods or a god, and it’s what you pay
attention to or what you worship. And they can be imported ones or they can be intrinsic ones” (19).

Iris’s numerous childhood compulsions to enact harm against her sister, including her desire to “hit her” (237), and to let her drown in the Louveteau River, as well as her “push[ing] [Laura] off the ledge (97) surrounding the Avilion lily pond, can be regarded as a prelude to the sacrificial violence she later inflicts upon her. Conversely, Laura’s longing to “g[i]ve herself over” (166-7) to others, and her liminal status within Port Ticonderoga due to her “odd, skewed element … that most people keep hidden” (89), configure her as an ideal victim for the sacrificial mechanism. Moreover, she appears to Iris as one who refuses to commit or perpetuate harm in any form, and who is greatly distressed by the “ill will of the universe” (85), thus ensuring that the violence from which sacrifice stems will not be sustained and that Laura’s sacrifice will, as Girard explains, “[prevent] violence from reverting to a state of immanence” (266). Similar to Alex, who is made into a sacrificial victim to carry Port Ticonderoga’s anxieties over socialist activities and “cold-blooded fanaticism” (215), the soldiers of World War I, who are sacrificed to ensure the perpetuity of “God and Civilization” (77), the aristocratic Sniflard virgins on the planet Zycron, who, according the male lover in “The Blind Assassin,” shed their blood to “replenish the five waning moons” (28) that prevent starvation, and even Iris, who is coercively offered to Richard in marriage in order to help settle growing disputes between Norval and his factory workers, Laura is represented as one sacrifice among many, yet the only sacrifice selected by Iris to resolve her conflicted sense of self, and to mend her feelings of rupture. Paradoxically enabling Iris to place the threat of self-harm behind her by enacting harm against another, Laura is regarded by
critics such as Fiona Tolan as one who is “instinctively drawn to the theme of betrayal and sacrifice” (262), as witnessed in her imagining herself as Dido, who famously kills herself “on the burning pyre or altar she’s made of all the objects connected to her vanished lover” (The Blind 498). Yet Iris’s mention that this translation of Virgil was completed “with [her] help” (498), and Laura’s repeatedly demonstrated inability to comprehend figurative constructions (92, 141, 147-8), suggest that Laura is perhaps a less willing victim than Tolan’s reading allows.

Hearing the news of Alex’s death in World War II, Iris is faced with her now certain confinement and the impossibility of continuing her escapes from the restrictive female role she plays in her marriage to Richard. Where her affair with Alex afforded her the opportunity to express her creativity and her “own ideas” (341), to transgress the rules of female convention, to speak out against her “being examined” (123) and objectified, and to go places where a “woman like [her] isn’t supposed to be caught dead” (25), her marriage constricts her to a life of “Worrying about the appropriateness of this or that” (303) and becoming “lost to [her]self” (298). However, Iris’s resurgent inclination towards self-harm, witnessed in “The Blind Assassin” and the woman’s responding to news of her lover’s death by imagining “[her] grave” (466), is soon replaced by her deferral of this selfsame impulse, and her seeking to escape her dangerous condition. In selecting a sacrificial victim upon whom she can purge her feelings of female confinement and thus deflect her violent impulse, Iris acknowledges that Laura and Alex had similarly had an affair in which Laura was enabled to escape from the oppressive Griffen household. As such, Iris is certain that her sister will suffer greatly in hearing of his death, and thus, that violence can be done to her in bearing this news. The harm that
Iris consequently inflicts upon her sister in presenting her with information that “pushes” her off” (488) the ledge appears as the “‘good’ violence” that Girard insists “must resemble the nonsacrificial variety” (37) in order to be effective, and further points to the indeterminate divide between psychological and physical violence in Atwood’s writing. Iris later confirms that it was words that “quite literally” forced Laura “over the edge” (490). The fading of Laura’s “light” (488) and her blanching immediately after this revelation suggests the intentional ambiguity over when Laura’s demise actually occurs and highlights what Sternberg Perrakis views as the “symbolic or literal” role “that the protagonist plays in the murder” (*my emphasis* 350). Other critics, such as David Ketterer, however, appear more certain about Iris’s culpability and her “responsibility for her sister’s suicide” (22).

Yet the maliciousness and spite that motivate Iris to accompany news of Alex’s passing with that of her affair suggest that her sacrifice is tainted by her sororial jealousy and contaminated with her human failings as a “false god,” pointing to what Sharon Rose Wilson observes as “the meaninglessness of sacrifice” ("Blindness" 186) in the narrative. Earning Iris her title as one of the novel’s blind assassins—a designation much more suited to her than the novel’s original title, *The Angel of Bad Behavior*, since Iris notes that “angels don’t write much” (498)—her failed sacrifice results in her being tormented by her actions, rather than purified by them. The subtext of the Procne and Philomel myth underlying the frame narrative offers an archetypal reading of Iris’s betrayal of, and consequent haunting by, Laura, and foretells the tragic ends ultimately met by both sisters, since in Atwood’s version of the myth in “Nightingale,” Philomel receives visitations from her sister following her unsuccessful sacrifice of Procne’s freedom to
save her own, and both sisters eventually face their death. Laura’s final words, telling Iris she will “talk to her later” (491), portend the night terrors and “apparitions” (35) Iris later suffers, and expose her to how the dead “tend to repeat [themselves]” (491), a lesson Joan and Elaine have similarly learned through their being haunted by Joan’s childhood and projected selves, and Cordelia,181 respectively. Committed to her own survival, however, Iris attempts to live with her guilt rather than die from her regret following her failed immolation. Similar to her effort to “be on the spot” (97) in order to claim her innocence following her childhood pushing of Laura off the garden ledge, Iris, immediately following Laura’s death, begins “concocting stories” (489) and returns home to ensure her being present to defend herself against potential accusations. Later, Iris carefully plans an appropriate costume for her visit to the morgue in deciding that she will need “gloves, and a hat with a veil. Something to cover the eyes” (2). In an alternate reading, however, this costume functions as a symbol of Iris’s continuing role as her sister’s “blind assassin.”

Iris’s ongoing entrapment by the codes governing proper womanhood following her failed sacrifice of Laura, evident in her decision not to divorce Richard when leaving him after Laura’s death, and in her packing her gardening books before her departure, comes as no surprise and points to her continued suffering as a figure drawn between the contradictory subject positions of the female and the artist. Again abiding her instinct to remain “Out of harm’s way” (41), Iris turns to Laura once more to resolve her internal conflicts, this time aiming to purge herself of her writerly identity and the potential for self-violence it gives rise to. While Iris initially attempts to dissociate herself from her writing of “The Blind Assassin” by imagining its composition through a “bodiless hand”
her sacrifice of Laura in identifying her as the novel’s author in its 1947 publication affords her a more complete abdication of her artistry. More precisely, it is Laura’s name that Iris does violence to with this act, which lingers on in Port Ticonderoga as synonymous with one who, despite her oddity, is believed to have fallen victim to an “accidental death” (3), who was never “suspected … of duplicity” (196), and who was a “lovely, dead young woman” (40).

Surrendering Laura in place of herself, Iris is enabled to safeguard herself against the threat of the Red Shoes Syndrome by posthumously identifying her sister as an artist within a society scornful of women’s creativity, thereby ruining a name that even Laura regarded as “So pure and so white” (89). Significantly, the subsequent public attacks against “The Blind Assassin” as “filth” and “muck” (40) seem leveled at its assumed author, rather than at the material object itself, which “fluttered at the edges of the stage like an ineffectual moth” (40) during the tumult of its reception.

Iris later admits that she takes pleasure in witnessing the fallout of such destructive gestures, “as long as [she] can watch it through the little secret window, as long as [she] won’t be involved” (478). However, repeating the outcome of her earlier sacrificial gesture, Iris’s attempt to dissociate herself from her artistry fails due to its commingling with her desire to preserve Laura’s memory in publishing under her name, reflecting Robinson’s observation that Iris holds a degree of “psychological entanglement with her sister” (347). Iris’s panic at the thought that, a mere few years after her death, Laura had been “papered over … almost as if she’d never existed” (508) contaminates and thus disrupts the sacrificial mechanism by confusing her victim, which Girard claims must be expelled as a “polluted object” that has “sop[ped] up impurities”
(95), with a figure that she longs to preserve. In this sense, Laura’s childhood act of crawling inside her mother’s sealskin coat in an effort to “conjur[e] [her] Mother back” (137) is reiterated by Iris in her cloaking herself with Laura’s identity to create “a memorial of some kind” (508). Offering evidence of her failed sacrifice, which Girard explains occurs when “those whom the sacrifice was designed to protect become its victims” (40), are the public attacks that Iris receives following the publication of “The Blind Assassin.” To Iris’s surprise, many verbal assaults are aimed not at Laura, but directly at her: “The anonymous letters began. Why had I arranged for this piece of filth to be published? … Had I no shame?” (40). Iris’s consequent efforts to disguise the attempted sacrifice of her sister, however, suggest that she does. Aiming to redeem her image after revealing her dubious use of Laura’s name in publishing “The Blind Assassin” and thus her role in Laura’s defamation, Iris calls her behavior many things: an attempt at “memorial,” “a failure of nerve,” an act of “simple prudence” (512), revealing the confusion of meaning she attempts to create around her gestures and their exegesis. In particular, Iris’s suggestion that her use of Laura’s name was an act of “justice” indicating their collaborative writing of the novel can be read as her efforts to conceal the injustice of her actions, given that Iris has elsewhere admitted to her “moral turpitude” (512), and to being “[not] much interested in … fine ethical points” (499). In short, such efforts to dissimulate her guilt appear as her attempts at “Getting the blood off [her] hands, one way or another” (494), and expose the ritual pattern behind her failed sacrificial attempts: surrender victim to sacrifice, lie, repeat.

Iris’s attempts to resolve her internal conflicts and to be present at the end in order to defend herself against potential imputations, however, are ultimately disappointed,
leaving the “you” that she addresses, read as both Sabrina and the unknown reader “in the future, after [she’s] dead” (43) that she earlier imagines, with the hermeneutic tasks of unraveling the yarn she has spun. While Iris’s voice persists beyond her own demise, appearing in the final paragraphs following the newspaper announcement of her death, Iris ultimately relinquishes her authorial control in stating, “I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have?” (521), thereby passing on to the next generation the final judgment of her actions and the problems faced by the female artist, both of which Iris leaves unresolved. Unlike Joan and Elaine, who survive their struggle with the Red Shoes Syndrome, Iris suffers the loss of her life in the end on account of the “imperfections” (48) of her heart that disallowed her to settle her internal conflicts through the sacrificial mechanism. Yet the mature age of Iris at the time of her passing and her having lived 83 years with her creativity undermines the Red Shoes Syndrome by suggesting that while the existential troubles of the female artist cannot, in all cases, be entirely avoided, such struggles are something to be lived through and endured as one pursues her art, rather than submitted to as a death “sentence.” Speaking from experience, Atwood explains that the female artist “need[s] to know [she] can sink, and survive it” (“Nine” 107).

Moreover, in addressing the conflicts generated by female creativity in her artist fictions, Atwood offers multiple revisions to the Red Shoes Syndrome which expose its unrealistic condensation of the female artist, highlighting what Showalter observes as the “impressionistic and unreliable” nature of generalized “Statements about the personal and psychological qualities of the woman [artist]” (A Literature 6). Beyond her refusing the lethality of the syndrome by illustrating how women can draw on projective strategies to deflect their compulsions towards self-violence, Atwood further re-envisions the basis of
the Red Shoes Syndrome by revealing how this condition highlights women’s troubled relations with both men and other women. Where Powell and Pressburger’s film suggests that Victoria’s suicide results from her being constrained by patriarchal delimitations of the female role, Atwood’s artist fictions indicate that a woman’s relationships with other women are both the means of her inheriting a sense of female creativity as a contradiction of terms, and the connections she exploits in attempting to resolve this tension. The various failures that Atwood’s female artists encounter in their projections, however, leave intact both Atwood’s suspicion of theoretical frames and her disbelief in final solutions, given that what appears as a resolution for one may entail disastrous consequences for an Other. Further, the disparate ends that Atwood’s narrators arrive at in their struggles with their creativity and female circumscriptions indicate how the female artist exceeds the conceptual constraints placed upon her. As Elaine bluntly states to her interviewer in response to her attempts to force the female artist into a procrustean image, “I am bigger” (88).

Notes
124 Atwood wore her red MBT shoes while reading selected poems at the Poetry Bash event held on October 14 at the Vertigo Theater Playhouse.
125 While Atwood does not espouse essentialist understandings of the self (“A Question” 54; “Using Other People’s” 222; “Opening a Door” 142), or suggest that “being” a writer is disconnected from “working” as a writer (“Uncollected Prose [B]”) she does propose writing and womanhood as ways of being (“On Being”), and thus linked to women’s existential experience.
126 Atwood and MacEwen first met in Toronto’s Bohemian Embassy coffeehouse in the 1960s, and, as Nathalie Cooke explains, “Over the next few years, Atwood and MacEwen would share many conversations about the practical realities of becoming, and surviving as, a female poet in the male-dominated literary world of their time” (Critical 8).
127 Although female suicide in the Victorian period was at times imagined as a moral transgression, a consequence of poverty, or even a comic act (Anderson 207-8), Deborah Gates confirms that “Most Victorians, whatever their class or education, had stock assumptions about suicide: it was committed by the unhappy, the lonely, the lovelorn, the mad, the ruined—all poor unfortunates at the end of an emotional tether” (40).
Atwood explains that “combining enie per bottle” (17).

Atwood’s father, Carl Edmund Atwood, was an entomologist and professor of zoology, and her older brother, Harold Leslie Atwood, is a professor of physiology. Further, Cooke explains that both Atwood and her brother “were good at science in school, and by the time they graduated from high school their marks were about the same in both science and English” (Biography 30).

While Christina Ljungberg, in her examination of how Zenia in The Robber Bride can be seen as a “manifestation of each protagonist’s own repressed unconscious” (363), highlights the violent woman as the object of projective fantasies, others, such as Nicole De Jong, in identifying Cordelia’s “projecting her own feelings of being different on Elaine” (101), have identified how the brutalizing woman additionally performs as agent of such projections. Also see Alice Palumbo’s “On the Border” (84) and Sarah Sceats’s Food, Consumption and the Body (119).

Similarly, in “If You Can’t Say Something Nice,” Atwood explains that “combining marriage and art was risky business. You could not be an empty vessel for two. The instructions were clear: one genie per bottle” (17).

Also see Atwood’s “Dissecting the Way a Writer Works” (11) and her “Introduction” to Women Writers at Work.

Contrasting with others’ problematic construction of a woman’s violence as her shadow side that fragments her consciousness, this analysis argues that self-violence is a result of, not reason for, self-divisiveness.

In “Poetry and Audience,” Atwood explains her use of pseudonyms for her literary and visual art: “I published with initials, because I feared rejection as a ‘lady writer,’ which everyone knew was about as bad as a ‘lady painter.’” Also see “Nine Beginnings.”

Atwood’s father, Carl Edmund Atwood, was an entomologist and professor of zoology, and her older brother, Harold Leslie Atwood, is a professor of physiology. Further, Cooke explains that both Atwood and her brother “were good at science in school, and by the time they graduated from high school their marks were about the same in both science and English” (Biography 30).

While Christina Ljungberg, in her examination of how Zenia in The Robber Bride can be seen as a “manifestation of each protagonist’s own repressed unconscious” (363), highlights the violent woman as the object of projective fantasies, others, such as Nicole De Jong, in identifying Cordelia’s “projecting her own feelings of being different on Elaine” (101), have identified how the brutalizing woman additionally performs as agent of such projections. Also see Alice Palumbo’s “On the Border” (84) and Sarah Sceats’s Food, Consumption and the Body (119).

See “On Being” (195) and Cat’s Eye (377).

Also see Freud (14:184).

Also see Freud (13:61).

For example, see Coral Ann Howells (“Transgressing” 147) and Gayle Greene (168).

For example, see Sharon Rose Wilson’s Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics (120), Cooke’s Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion (92-3), Catherine Sheldrick Ross (463) and Julie Fenwick’s “The Silence of the Mermaid.”

For example, Emma Parker argues that Joan’s “eating is employed as a metaphor for power” (349) and Sarah Sceats maintains that Atwood employs eating practices as a form of “political engagement” that “opposes social fragmentation and allays both individual and cultural yearnings for completion” (7). Also see Cude (45).

In “Uglypuss,” Joel similarly over-indulges in “pizza, Kentucky Fried, doughnuts from the Dunkin’ Doughnuts” (71) as a “kind of perverse rebellion” against his lover Becka (72).

Joan’s existential anxiety is compounded by her overhearing, as a young girl, her parents’ argument over her father’s failure to abort her mother’s pregnancy (77), suggesting how Joan’s existential troubles are multiply determined.

Joan similarly holds her mother accountable for acts of shared injustice when she blames her mother alone for a mutual decision between Frances and Miss Flegg to
eliminate Joan’s role in the “Butterfly Frolic”: “I always felt that if my mother hadn’t interfered Miss Flegg would have noticed nothing” (47).

Shuli Barzilai similarly finds that “Joan’s survival strategy has been to lead a double life, compartmentalizing the functions of selfless wife … and secret writer of Costume Gothics” (233).

This exchange is nearly identical to the conversation between the narrator of *Surfacing* and her (now ex-) lover (56), indicating how Atwood’s artist fictions remain conversant with one another.

This discussion differentiates between Joan’s collection of poems, “Lady Oracle,” and Atwood’s novel of the same name by placing the former within quotations.

Significantly, Joan keeps “all the words [produced through automatic writing], and the longer sections [she] work[s] out from them, in a file folder marked *Recipes*” (222).

Identifying this as a primarily “North American problem,” Atwood explains that the autobiographical bias is largely gender specific and due to the “remarkably tenacious” idea that women are “less capable of invention” (“My Mother” 72).

Joan’s feigned death similarly engages nineteenth-century conventions of female suicide, which identified drowning as a distinctively female form of self-inflicted death (Olive Anderson 19) and which presumed that female suicide was the tragic result of lost love. More precisely, the tendencies towards an autobiographical reading of “Lady Oracle” and the collection’s description of the female heroine’s dangerous love affair with “a man in a cloak, with icicle teeth and eyes of fire” (226), when considered alongside the alternate reading of Joan’s suicide as the result of the Red Shoes Syndrome, suggest that Joan’s simulated suicide is a success to the extent that it offers the public multiple red herrings.

Gilbert and Gubar’s illumination of this dichotomous positioning of women in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) was contemporaneous with Atwood’s writing of *Cat’s Eye*, which was composed from a number of stories and short sketches written long before the novel’s publication in the fall of 1988. See Cooke’s *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (297).

The evening of her retrospective exhibit, Elaine reflects on how the word “different” is a sign of failed femininity, “the quintessential Toronto middle-class-matron putdown, the ultimate disapproval” (351).

Elaine further observes that self-effacing gestures are a central part of the feminine social script. While playing with Grace and Carol, Elaine learns that she is expected to degrade her collage art while praising that which has been produced by her friends: “Their voices are wheedling and false; I can tell they don’t mean it, each one thinks her own [work] on her own page is good. But it’s the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too” (53).

As a result of this early lesson, Elaine is later compelled to feel “as if [she doesn’t] exist” (68) while standing in the forest at night.

Ironically, the years of World War II that Elaine and her family spend in the woods, “like nomads on the far edges of the war” (25), are a time of relative peace for Elaine, while her family’s post-war relocation to Toronto marks her entry into a battle that she is forced to fight on a daily basis against the prescriptive ideals of femininity.
Elaine’s encounter with a large dead raven that “looks at [her] with its shrunken-up eye” (144) and thus offers her an opportunity to meditate on death as an opportunity for escape, is in contrast to the narrator’s encounter with a dead heron in *Surfacing*, where the heron’s “look[ing] at [her] with its mashed eye” (124) occasions her consideration of violence as a waste of life and a lamentable, but unavoidable, part of human society.

The circumstances of fainting that Atwood describes in “Fainting” (*Murder*) bear a strong resemblance to the context of Elaine’s initial experience with fainting (169-71) and similarly describes this temporary loss of consciousness as a means of escape.

Chinmoy Banerjee similarly finds that Cordelia is “interchangeable with the image of the Virgin Mary” (517) and thus represents the possibility of salvation for Elaine.

Thus revealing the reciprocal side to what critics have repeatedly noted as Cordelia’s efforts to project her self-hatred onto Elaine. See McCombs (16), and De Jong (101).

For example, see *Surfacing* (151) and *Lady Oracle* (219-220).

Although, as Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis maintains, the middle-aged Elaine to a degree faces her own “transience” and “evanescence” (349) that prompts her looking back in time to gain a sense of groundedness, and thus suggests how the novel’s narrative “I” is never an entirely stable subjectivity.

This description recalls Joan’s experience of going “into the mirror one evening” and later finding that she “couldn’t get out again” (223), further intimating the ambivalent nature of projective strategies.

The razor that Elaine uses stands as a symbol of the masculine artistic tradition, given that she finds it on her ex-husband’s art workbench, offering a reminder that a fundamental reason for her despair is her society’s engendering of artistry.

Also see Hite (137) and Gayle Greene (207-214).

Further illustrating this difficulty is Elaine’s feminist interviewer from the formerly titled “Women’s Pages” who, seeking to discover the inspiration behind Elaine’s visual art, acknowledges the reality of women’s anger and “stories of outrage” (90), yet “Brightly and neatly … veers away from [discussions of] war” (89).

Elaine’s admission suggests her suffering from what Mihoko Suzuki terms “sororophobia” (“Rewriting”).

See Atwood’s interview “Struggling with Your Angel” (174-5).

This discussion will differentiate between the contained narrative of “The Blind Assassin,” which details the encounters of two unnamed lovers, and Atwood’s tripartite novel of the same name, by placing the former in quotation marks.

Iris later states that “The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date” (283). However, she later admits that this ideal is “Impossible, of course” (283).

The high cost of Iris’s clumsiness later becomes apparent in causing her to lose her daughter Aimee to the care of Winifred (512).

The woman lover at times engages in storytelling (341-343) and describes “the blood moving through her own heart” as “a word, a word, a word” (112).

Following her marriage to Richard, Iris’s visage calls to mind the blank features of Mrs. Smeath as domestic angel to the extent that her face similarly appears “erased, featureless, like an oval of used soap, or the moon on the wane” (*The Blind Assassin*)
235), intimating how Iris is further shaped by the social forces urging women to become de-individualized angels of the house.

172 While the elderly Iris claims that this assumed conjunction between cultural knowledge and moral authority was confined to early twentieth-century society, something that “people believed, then” (59), evidence of its continuation appears in the Laura Chase Memorial Prize that Winifred endows following Laura’s death. Presumably an attempt to display her cultural and moral refinement, Winifred establishes this prize to award short stories that display “literary and also moral values” (31).

173 Iris’s description of the Arcadian Court, where a “men only” balcony allows male customers to “sit … and look down on the ladies, feathered and twittering” (230), reveals how public spaces were designed to reinforce this understanding of the female body.

174 As an elderly woman, Iris returns to the Jubilee Bridge and similarly considers the “menacing potential” of the waters below while experiencing feelings of “breathlessness” and of being “in over [her] head” (299). Also see (246).

175 Howells similarly characterizes Iris’s memoir as “a kind of bleeding to death” (“Writing” 117) that she pursues willingly.

176 For example, see Howells (“Writing” 116) and Sternberg Perrakis (349).

177 For Girard, such attributes are necessary qualities of the sacrificial victim in order to ensure that the violence which sacrifice aims to eradicate does not return, or become perpetuated: “Every time the sacrifice accompanies its desired effect … bad violence is converted into good stability” (266).

178 Marta Dvorak similarly argues that Laura “continues to take locutions literally, never learning to decode linguistic conventions with their implicit and opaque dimensions” (64).

179 Although the lovers’ mutual recognition in “The Blind Assassin” of the class differences between them, and that “things ain’t even-steven” (125), suggests that this relationship also has its shortcomings and challenges.

180 Cooke notes that “the three sections of the novel are dominated by three different blind assassins: those described in the story told by the male fugitive of Laura Chase’s novel, The Blind Assassin; Richard Griffen; and Iris” (Critical 140)

181 While the fate of Cordelia is left uncertain following her disappearance from Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home, her haunting of the middle-aged Elaine suggests Atwood’s sense that those who have vanished, like those who have died, carry on in a “ghostlike demi-existence” (Strange Things 19).

182 Such descriptions reflect Girard’s assertion that the sacrificial victim “must be neither too familiar to the community nor too foreign to it” (271).

183 Here, Iris’ s use of her sister’s name resembles Joan’s appropriation of her Aunt Lou’s name in publishing her Costume Gothics. According to Joan, this gesture is intended as “a kind of memorial to [Aunt Lou]” (157).
Chapter 4

Writing the Wrong: Sentencing and Ethical Responses to Female Violence in the Mythic Fictions of Margaret Atwood

… once you enter into social relationships, ethics has to come in.

(Atwood “Just Looking” 123).

Mythic narratives and archetypes appear characteristically throughout the fiction and poetry of Margaret Atwood, and her recent publications are no exception. Contrary to Karen Armstrong’s assertion that “Today mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute” due to our perception of such modes of thought as “irrational and self-indulgent” (2), Atwood, in the novella The Penelopiad (2005) and the mini-fiction collection The Tent (2006), rewrites traditional myths in order to demonstrate the enduring relevance of myth and its utility in providing readers with a means to explore conventional and alternative ethical responses to the aggressive acts of violent women. Reflecting Atwood’s understanding of revisionism as “‘re-vision’—seeing something again” (“A Conversation” 174) —The Penelopiad redrafts the story of Homer’s Odyssey from the point of view of Odysseus’s wife Penelope, and in the process reformulates cultural narratives of women, violence, and justice in order to suggest that unconventional acts of violence call for unconventional systems of retributive justice. Seeking to requite and to “write” the wrongs done by Helen through her incitement of the Trojan War, Penelope manipulates her narrative to portray Helen as a figure whose previous public acts of indirect violence parallel the emotive cruelties she commits on a personal level in the present. The Penelopiad brings into focus Penelope’s use of narrative justice to redress the erroneously idealized image of Helen, signaling Penelope’s appropriation of the traditionally masculine realm of justice in order to
exact a feminine form of “sentencing,” only to reveal increasingly that her moral authority is not as flawless as she imagines it to be and to suggest the operation of other restorative systems literally and figuratively at play in the narrative. Similarly, the mini-fictions contained in *The Tent* frequently revise mythic plots in order to draw attention to the range of female violence and to the ethical responses such acts necessitate. Yet unlike Penelope’s construction of a narrative justice, which both disrupts and maintains judicial reasoning, the myth narratives of *The Tent* look beyond masculine justice constructs by examining a feminine care ethic that eschews retributive principles in favor of a moral system that views sympathy and a sense of interconnectivity as central to ethical action. More broadly, despite her extensive revision of traditional myths and conventional ethics through the figure of the brutalizing woman, Atwood preserves and enriches the long-held understanding of myths as stories which aid us in reaching an understanding of the enigmatic and difficult elements of our world, in Atwood’s fictions defined in part as the violent woman and our ethical responses to her.

The persistence of mythic figures in the contemporary settings of Atwood’s recent fiction suggests the ways in which Atwood’s conceptualization of myth has been influenced and shaped by Northrop Frye, who, in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), posits that mythic archetypes constitute the underlying pattern of literature across time and space and that “myths explain the structural principles behind familiar literary facts” (215). According to Frye, there exist a finite number of timeless images and structures of meaning that provide the basic “grammar of literary archetypes” (135), where such archetypal images necessarily include those of Classical and Biblical heritage, the latter of which is “the main source for undisplaced myth in our tradition” (140). Atwood, in an
interview with Karla Hammond, clearly aligns herself with Frye’s delineations of myth in asserting that the term “myth” does not “pertain to Greek myths alone,” since “traditional myths means traditional stories that have been repeated frequently” and must therefore be inclusive of “Biblical [myths that] have been very important in our society” (114-115).

Yet Atwood moves beyond Frye’s theory of “the mythical mode” (134) by demonstrating how the archetypal “grammar” of literature, and more broadly language in general, offer a space of play for the writer and an opportunity for the rewriting of grammatical rules and precepts. Further, while Frye insists that mythical episodes, replete with pure metaphorical activity, possess “an abstractly literary quality,” and “[give] up the external analogy to ‘life’” (135) through their “abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design” (136), Atwood endeavors to reinvigorate traditional archetypal criticism with a new dynamism by situating myths within quotidian settings and investing them with the unexceptional issues of daily existence, which, common as they may be, continue to challenge us. In addition to providing a world parallel to our own, mythical realms, for Atwood, often coincide with everyday life and describe a place where “grudges are held, vengeance is exacted” and “crimes … beget consequences years later” (“Of Myths” 260). Through this system of action and reaction, transgression and justice, myths in Atwood’s recent fiction describe a moral imperative and, as Armstrong notes, “[put] us in the correct … posture for right action” (4).

The self-reflexive revision of the Odyssey offered by The Penelopiad provides a valuable example of how Atwood both aligns with and advances Frye’s myth theory by re-writing archetypes of female passivity and victimization and by suffusing her myth with the everyday. Set in modern day Hades, The Penelopiad re-tells Homer’s famous
epic from the perspective of Penelope as she describes her daily thoughts and encounters in the after-world, and offers a retrospective account of her previous life in ancient Greece and her awaiting the return of Odysseus during his twenty year absence for war, travel and adventure. Penelope’s difficult childhood, as the daughter of a selfish father, Icarus of Sparta, and a negligent Naiad mother, is clearly seen to leave its deleterious mark upon her, and ill-prepares her for the later challenges of single-handedly raising her son, Telemachus, and ruling Ithaca, while dealing with the vast number of belligerent Suitors who invade her palace in Odysseus’s absence. In Penelope’s struggle to maintain the resources and honor of her kingdom, it is her maids, whom she likens to sisters, that embody the greatest wellspring of support and stability and that later represent the chorus of her narrative, while Penelope’s veritable kin, Helen of Troy, signifies the greatest source of disruption in Penelope’s past and present life. As such, Penelope describes the murder of her slothful Suitors and her ostensibly disloyal maids upon Odysseus’s return at the end as an event of betrayal and bloodshed. Yet what Homer does not divulge, and what Atwood’s Penelope does not explicitly identify, is that Odysseus’s slaughter was also an event that was carried out with the help of unexpected accomplices, and which conceals many secrets, indicating how Penelope, like Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, has created a dubious narrative “not because of what [she has] set down, but because of what [she has] omitted” (*The Blind Assassin* 395).

Similar to Atwood’s perception of myth, which can be imagined as a composite informed by both Frygian theories and her own innovations, Penelope’s understanding of justice is a necessarily synthesized one. Before examining Penelope’s specific attempts at, and reasons for, employing justice measures in *The Penelopiad*, it is necessary to
observe how she is offered in Atwood’s narrative as a figure whose notions of justice form a complex that responds to and integrates both present-day and ancient Greek constructions of justice.\textsuperscript{186} While Penelope’s dually informed understanding of justice will be returned to later in this discussion, it is significant to note here how \textit{The Penelopiad} spans the two very different historical times of the ancient past and the modern day present, thus indicating how Penelope has been inculcated with two disparate notions of justice. Outlining the modern perceptions of justice that Penelope aligns with, Elizabeth Kiss definitively states that justice is today understood as “the virtue or norm by which all receive their due,” and as a process in which there is a “morally appropriate distribution of social benefits and burdens, rewards and punishments, status and voice” (“Justice” 487).

Contrasting with such modern constructions of justice is the ancient Greek understanding of judicial principles and retribution. For the inhabitants of early archaic Greece, justice was predominantly a masculine realm wherein little consideration was given to a proportionate graduation of penalties, and typically brutal punitive acts were ultimately determined by the offended individual(s), rather than by an impartial and external body. Preceding the development of courts, constitutions and inscribed legal codes in the seventh century BC, Greece in the eighth century BC possessed “no written laws or courts” and “Crimes were defined not by the state but by the accepted customary norms of the kinship households that made up the society” (Tetlow 27). In the absence of larger justice systems and regulatory laws, the duty of defining the criminal act and of carrying out the punishments for inter-familial crimes fell on the victims themselves (or on the household head of the victim’s family in the event of the incapacity, death, infancy
or female gender of the victim) or on the king following the occurrence of a state offence. In both the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*, the long-term absence (and potential death) of Odysseus and the adolescence of Telemachus uniquely render Penelope head of both her household and state and permit her growth into the traditionally masculine role of distributor of justice. Penelope’s ability in the *Odyssey* to make “sophisticated moral choice[s]” (Foley 105), to settle disputes amongst her male suitors, and Agamemnon’s praise of Penelope’s “virtue” (24.195) and constancy (24.197) combine to suggest that the refined judicial abilities of Penelope became a constituent element of, and in large part defined, her traditional public identity.

Steady in her ancient legacy as a judicial figure, Atwood’s Penelope refuses to drink from the Lethean waters of oblivion, and as a result is herself consumed with the injustices of the past, and in particular with Helen of Troy’s eluding of justice following her provocation of the Trojan War. The type of violence that Penelope holds Helen culpable for is one in which her violent actions exist in an indirect relationship to the resultant harm, and which reflects Patricia Pearson’s insistence that women frequently abandon physical violence and “become aggressors of a different kind” by developing into “masters of indirection” (17). Reflecting Atwood’s earlier poetic attempts to work through the image of Helen by depicting her as an erotic dancer who evokes the “bleary / hopeless love” of her worshippers and who bears the warning, “Touch me and you’ll burn” (“Helen of Troy” 34, 36), Penelope’s first mention of Helen protests her unfair and preferential treatment amongst modern day conjurers and admirers despite her “notorious” (20) deeds. From here, her thoughts rapidly move towards the indictment of Helen as “a woman who’d driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great
city to go up in flames” (21-22). Moreover, Penelope observes how Helen consciously continues to drive men “mad with lust” through her tantalizing, yet ultimately immaterial, apparitions before men that signify for Helen “a return to the old days” (20) and which parallel the “mental torture” of the gods who inflict punishment upon the villainous dead by “conjur[ing] up banquets—big platters of meat, heaps of bread, bunches of grapes—and then snatch them away” (16). Penelope’s arraignment of Helen, while clearly concerned with linking Helen to the commencement of the Trojan War, is particularly invested in revealing that “Helen was never punished, not one bit. … You’d think Helen might have got a good whipping at the very least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. But she didn’t” (22).189 While the Penelope of Homer’s *Odyssey* mitigates Helen’s guilt by stating that “It was the god [Aphrodite] who drove her to do [her] shameful deed” (23.221-222),190 Atwood’s Penelope insists on Helen’s culpability for her actions by exhibiting the intentionality behind Helen’s indirectly violent acts and further constructs Helen into an appropriate recipient of justice by undermining her ostensible genealogical connection to the gods, who, in Atwood’s text, are exempt from systems of human justice.

Unlike the ambiguity behind Helen’s admission of guilt and repentance in the *Odyssey*, in which she admits to the “shameless creature that [she] was” (4.145) immediately after flattering Telemachus and aggrandizing herself through her magnificent entrance, Helen’s ruminations and stories of war in *The Penelopiad* clearly evince her indirect violence as intentional and self-confirming. In addition to the “selfishness and … deranged lust” (76) that she finds responsible for enkindling Helen’s actions, Penelope discerns Helen’s use of violence to communicate her agency and her
power to effect widespread destruction. Penelope recalls that, in Helen’s recounting to her the story of the Athenian War, the “part of the story [Helen] enjoyed the most was the number of men who’d died” (75) since Helen insists that such men did not die “for [her],” but “because of [her]” (154). Similar to the self-congratulatory tales Helen weaves before an audience of Telemachus and Menelaus in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, the stories Helen relates to Penelope in *The Penelopiad* concerning her rebirths and “latest conquests” in the world of the living further reveal the sense of self-affirmation Helen achieves in recounting stories of the “men she’s ruined” and the “Empires [that] have fallen because of her” (187). Moreover, the intimate ties between Helen’s storytelling and her experience of empowerment in violence suggest that the inherent capacity of narrative to be endlessly reiterated is used by Helen to continually communicate and confirm her prerogative. Yet Penelope’s similar use of storytelling as a correctional measure to bring Helen to justice reveals that this selfsame enduring quality of narrative will also function towards the achievement and permanence of Helen’s downfall.

In an effort to further demythologize the idealized image of Helen and to render her a suitable recipient of justice, Penelope undermines Helen’s claims to being the daughter of Zeus and brings to the fore the falsity of Helen’s reputed divine lineage, since “crediting some god for one’s inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not” (112).

Acknowledging that Helen is “quite stuck-up” (20) about her presumed genealogical link to the supreme deity of ancient Greece and the license to immorality that this creates in Helen, where Helen imagines “she could do anything she wanted, just like the gods from whom—she was convinced—she was descended” (76), Penelope attempts to give Helen
a thoroughly human dimension, and *ipso facto* hold her accountable for her harms.

Similar to the humanization of Circe in “Circe/Mud Poems” (*You Are Happy*), Penelope endeavors to ground Helen by exposing as fraudulent her supposed divine conception, derogatorily terming it “that swan-rape concoction” (20). In such efforts to disassociate Helen from the gods of Olympus—who are described as “childish” and prone to “making a mess” in their excessive acts of violence before exhausting themselves and “g[oing] to sleep” (24), and as such are both external to human justice structures and inculpable for the “[human] suffering … they love to savour” (124) and instantiate—Penelope seems conscious of what Nancy Felson-Rubin observes is the propensity of half-divine humans to escape the full experience of the human condition and thus avoid “the full force of human pain” (99). This conscientiousness suggests that, for Penelope, Helen’s capacity to experience the mental anguish of guilt is an integral part in the enactment of narrative justice.

Yet Penelope is not solely concerned with holding Helen accountable for her public and indirect malefactions of the past. Penelope’s repeated focus on Helen’s current use of words as weapons to undermine others’ sense of self-worth signals Penelope’s further interest in allocating moral blame for the personal and direct cruelties Helen commits in the present. Helen’s use of psychological violence against Penelope suggests that Helen has consciously tailored her acts of aggression to suit the vulnerabilities of her victims. Given that Penelope is no longer a part of “the world of bodies” (4) and is thus “beyond that kind of suffering” (24), Helen targets the less physical aspects of Penelope that remain. Aiming to diminish Penelope’s sense of her own ingenuity, a trait Penelope identifies as central to her identity, Helen insinuates to Penelope that her cleverness is a
dubious attribute perhaps sustained by rumor alone (34), and further endeavors to undermine Penelope’s appreciation of her own physical beauty by drawing Penelope’s attention to her “short legs” (33) and by referring to Penelope through the epithet of “little duckie” (33). While this diminutive commemorates Penelope’s rescue by ducks after her father attempted to drown her, Helen’s reference to Penelope as “little duckie” is undoubtedly further intended to draw Penelope’s attention to the contrasting beauty of Helen and her reputed genealogical connection to a seemingly more glorious father in the figure of Zeus, who, in the guise of a swan, impregnated Helen’s mother Leda.193

Significantly, Helen’s use of artifice to obscure aggression and of “affable condescension” (153) to devalue Penelope, where Helen’s “lightest sayings were often her cruellest” (33), highlights the duplicity characteristic of Helen, and of her self-proclaimed “Divine beauty” (154), which imperfectly conceals the “septic bitch” (131) Penelope finds lying half hidden beneath. Notwithstanding Telemachus’s perception of women as “overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment” (128), Penelope’s focus on Helen’s use of cruel words as “her sting” (35), and her broad use of judicial phrases and terms such as “aided and abetted” (122), “evidence” (123), “witnessed” and “proof” (144), compound the suggestion that Penelope is consciously acting as a moral agent and attempting to reckon Helen’s past and present, public and personal transgressions.

Penelope abides ancient notions of justice by personally responding to violations that have targeted her and her family and by maintaining her position as arbiter and enactor of justice assigned to her during her life in ancient Greece,194 yet simultaneously diverges from archaic modes of punishment, which, according to Elisabeth Meier Tetlow,
“had to be immediate and simple, such as death, because there were no structures for other forms of punishment, no prisons, and no currency” (21). Penelope’s use of her narrative to “write” the wrongs committed by Helen works towards the opposite effect achieved by masculine and ancient modes of discipline by enabling a form of justice which, through its inherent connection to narrative, enacts a more enduring and subtle form of retribution. Similar to Iris Chase, who uses her writing to exact revenge against her husband and sister-in-law in The Blind Assassin, and even Atwood herself, who Nathalie Cooke insists employs “her pen as a weapon” (Critical 16),195 Penelope offers her narrative as more than a mere telling of events. Demonstrating the belated impact of her Naiad mother’s advice to “Behave like water … Flow around [obstacles]” (108) and to remember that “Dripping water wears away a stone” (43),196 Penelope crafts a means of exacting justice upon Helen by constructing a narrative which, through its dialogue and descriptions, encircles and moves around the image of Helen in a fluid manner to slowly erode her falsely flawless image, ultimately signaling Penelope’s taking possession of the traditionally masculine realm of justice in an effort to achieve a feminine form of “sentencing.” Penelope’s enactment of and movement towards justice here is by no means direct or linear; rather, justice in the narrative operates through Penelope’s gatherings of observations and responses that collectively redefine and correct the idealized image proffered to Helen in the Odyssey and more recently in contemporary culture. While Mihoko Suzuki maintains that poets writing after Homer, such as Virgil, Spenser and Shakespeare, often recast Helen as a figure of duplicity and suspicion “to be scapegoated and repudiated” (Metamorphoses 17), it is the wholly modern and
hackneyed image of Helen as a figure of naïveté and goddess-like beauty that Penelope protests and endeavors to change.197

In addition to Penelope’s use of an enduring, rather than barbaric, mode of retribution, the influence of contemporary conceptualizations of justice upon Penelope’s understanding of retributive acts is suggested by the appropriateness of Penelope’s narrative justice to the character of, and transgressions committed by, Helen. Unlike the typical Suitor, whom Penelope describes as being staunchly resistant to the threat of public defacement and immune to the “fear [that] the others would jeer at him” (107), Helen is defined as a figure who “had a pair of invisible antennae that twitch at the merest whiff of a man” (153) and who, as exemplified during the Trojan War, strategically manipulates her physical appearances in the presence of others to achieve a sense of power, at times “just to show she could” (29). Not surprisingly, Helen is never seen unattended in the narrative, reflecting her dependency on others to generate her sense of self-worth and thus her vulnerability to the shifts in public opinion about her promised through narrative justice. As such, Penelope’s effort to correct Helen’s public image is a morally appropriate and thus modernistic approach to punishing Helen for her past and present transgressions and, perhaps most significantly, to preventing the recurrence of such wrongs in the future.

Exhibiting Atwood’s self-reflexive understanding of her fiction as “linked with notions of morality” and her observation of her fictional characters’ tendency to “judge each other” (“Spotty-Handed” 161), Penelope’s sentencing of Helen endeavors to bring about the literary demise of Helen as paragon of divine beauty and womanly grace, yet in her effort to do so, Penelope collapses evidence convicting Helen and judgment,
corroboration and correction into one abbreviated act of justice. While Penelope directly addresses her readers through the second person pronoun and thus invites, or more aptly requires, them to bear witness to her narrative justice, the readers of *The Penelopiad* are ultimately a silent jury, leaving Penelope to perform as judge, prosecutor and evaluative jury as she works to reveal Helen’s culpability for her past and present acts of violence. Similarly, in her impassioned pursuit of reparation, Penelope, like the narrator of *Surfacing* early on in the narrative, attempts to construct a perfectly polarized world, in which she imagines that the dichotomies of good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood can, and should, exist in their unalloyed states; Karen F. Stein, in her examination of Atwood’s fictional storytellers, similarly observes that the “motif of telling a story in order to name and blame an evil-doer recurs in different forms in Atwood’s fiction” (“Talking Back” 158). Significantly, Penelope’s attempts to “name and blame” Helen ironically work to expose her own guilt in acting as a Medusa figure who transforms Helen’s elusive and mythic flesh into stone by depicting her as uniformly evil and predictably malicious. Recalling the unnamed artist’s subject in Atwood’s short story “Iconography,” whose appearances have been worked to excess and whose interior thoughts and emotions are largely obscured by the artist’s repeated re-creation and representation of her exterior, Helen’s appearance in *The Penelopiad* is depicted as so entirely overwrought that her surface manners and violent behaviors are assumed to indicate an absolutely cruel and malign subjectivity. The various ways in which Helen has been “framed” by both Homer and Penelope suggest that a predetermined narrative has been imposed upon an ultimately indeterminate mythological figure whose vice, but not unfiltered voice, is present in the text. Penelope’s interrogative questions to
Telemachus upon his return from visiting Helen and Menelaus, in which Penelope foregoes all other interests in demanding from Telemachus an answer to her question of “how did [Helen] look?” (132), exemplifies Penelope’s broader tendency to overlook the complex interiority of Helen in favor of examining her exteriority and manifest actions.

Perhaps more pressing, however, is the recognition of how Penelope, through her intent focus on Helen, unsuccessfully attempts to obscure and direct attention away from her own indirectly murderous behaviors. Adrienne Rich’s observation that evasions of the truth are “usually attempts to make everything simpler … than it really is, or ought to be” (“Women and Honor” 188) illustrates how Penelope’s role as moral arbiter masks her less esteemed and even lesser known behaviors and reflects the imperative stated in “Murder in the Dark” that “The murderer must lie” (30). As failed escape artist, Penelope is unable to evade the guilt that she wishes to assign to others, or to withhold and contain evidence of her own involvement in the deaths of the Suitors and her twelve young maids. The oversights that Penelope enacts through her concentration on Helen reconfigure the axiom that “justice is blind” and reveal that, unlike Teiresias “the seer” (96) whose blindness is indelibly linked to his ability to see the truth, Penelope engages in a selective blindness to certain realities that signifies her refusal to acknowledge her full version of the truth and its various implications.

Through small ruptures in the unity and coherence of her character, Penelope reveals her self-representation as a laundered one, where her public projection of herself as a figure of justice inevitably does an injustice to her own layers of complexity and inconstancy. Fittingly, it is Helen who most clearly exposes such inconsistencies in
Penelope’s performance of inculpability and her involvement in the murder of her Suitors. Encountering Helen in the fields of asphodel en route to her bath, Penelope exchanges feigned pleasantries with Helen as their conversation, which appears as a thinly veiled form of verbal sparring, rapidly crescendos into Helen pointedly asking Penelope: “‘Tell me, little duck—how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?’” (155). In focusing on the competitive undertones of the sharply posed question, and in concluding, presumably correctly, that Helen is interested in comparing the death tolls resulting from the Athenian and Trojan Wars with those resulting from the return of Odysseus, Penelope is led to respond, “‘Quite a lot’” (156). In addition to Penelope’s off-handed reply, which clearly exposes her intimate connection to the massacre committed, Helen’s retort, in which she pointedly states to Penelope, “I’m sure you felt more important because of it. Maybe you even felt prettier” (156), suggests how, for Helen and perhaps for Penelope, a woman’s ability to incite large-scale bloodshed and to successfully commit indirect violence is in part definitive of her self-worth and, paradoxically, her femininity. Less explicit indications of Penelope’s guilt appear in her demonstrations of forgetfulness. Similar to Helen’s recognition of the utility of oblivion in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* and her consumption of an Egyptian potion to quell her memories, Penelope’s use of the language of forgetfulness in *The Penelopiad*—evident in her seeming tendency to lose her narrative thread and in her casually stating, “Where was I? Oh yes” (24)—deludes the reader into believing that her memory is a tenuous one. More precisely, such ostensible failures of recollection obscure the fact that Penelope holds deeply resonant and powerful memories which trouble the unimpeachable image she aims to uphold.
Yet Penelope’s implication in atrocity is not confined to her involvement in the massacre of the Suitors. After claiming that she “never would have hurt [her maids], not of [her] own accord” (115), Penelope discloses that it was she who both told the twelve young women “to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent” (115) in order to discover the plans of her increasingly menacing guests, and who made the choice not to tell Eurycleia of her cunning use of the maids to defend her status and properties. In particular, Penelope describes this latter decision as “a grave mistake” (115), intimating how this act of non-disclosure led to Eurycleia’s accusing the maids of high treason. While illustrating Atwood’s recognition of the written word’s ability to perform as evidence, such small and ultimately partial admissions of culpability on Penelope’s behalf are padded by both her further diversionary tactics of localizing blame in Eurycleia, where Penelope insists that prior to the slaughter Odysseus relied on Eurycleia’s assistance to identify the unfaithful maids (145), and by her claims to self-defense. Such observations suggest that Penelope is closely monitoring the degree of guilt she is opening herself up to. Looking back on the events leading up to the execution of her maids, Penelope concedes that her “actions were ill-considered, and causing harm,” yet immediately qualifies this statement with the self-justifying claim: “But I was running out of time, and becoming desperate, and I had to use every ruse and stratagem at my command” (118), thus demonstrating Penelope’s use of the rebuttal processes integral to justice procedures that she elsewhere denies to Helen in her truncated justice practice. Considered together, Penelope’s small admissions of mea culpa ultimately draw attention to Penelope’s guilt and blameworthiness in the death of the Suitors and the maids. Yet such confessions also summarily reveal how Penelope
is offering a red herring through many of her revelations and paradoxically attempting to evade the reader’s recognition of her more damning crime through confessing to lesser transgressions. In other words, Penelope appears fully aware that sometimes the most effective place to hide is out in the open. Reflecting her earlier representation of Penelope in “Circe/ Mud Poems” as a “manipulator” and “victimizer” (Buchbinder 133), Atwood’s depiction of Penelope in *The Penelopiad* reveals Penelope’s identity as a text which must be read with caution.

Beyond the fleeting and carefully monitored inconsistencies that cumulatively work to demonstrate Penelope’s involvement in the deaths of her Suitors and maids, the unauthorized and deeply intentional testimonies of the maids themselves provide the most condemning evidence against Penelope’s innocence. Through their appropriation of voice, the maids expose how mythologies of Penelope’s virtuousness are based not on her behaviors, but on the fact that she, like Odysseus, has “had the word / at [her] command” (6). In a performance that both re-enacts a condemning scene between Penelope and Eurycleia and that operates, paradoxically, as a paratext offering tentative answers to the central questions of the narrative, the maids draw attention to Penelope’s extramarital affairs and to the “Suitors [she] ha[s] not resisted” in order to reveal how their dangerous knowledge of Penelope’s “every lawless thrill” (150) has led Penelope, in the company of Eurycleia, to devise an intricate murder plot that will ensure their silence concerning such matters upon Odysseus’s return. Despite Penelope’s concerted efforts, in the previous section entitled “Slanderous Gossip,” to repudiate the existence of such affairs by rendering the possibility of such extra-marital relations absurd and illogical, the thespian maids in their drama expose how Penelope conscripts Eurycleia to perform in her scheme
by pointing out to Odysseus “those maids as feckless and / disloyal” and by convincing him that such women are “not fit to be / The doting slaves of such a Lord as he!” (150). Implicitly agreeing with Eurycleia’s observation that this charge will most certainly lead to the death of the accused maids, Penelope rests satisfied at the closing of the maid’s performance, confident that this plot will allow her to remain “in fame a model wife” (151).

The interruptive presence of the maids’ choral voices provides intervals of counter-narrative to Penelope’s counter-cum-master narrative, and counter-truths to Penelope’s truth claims, thus indicating the deeply self-reflexive quality of Atwood’s text and instantiating a sense of balance that Penelope’s attempts at justice unsuccessfully endeavored to restore. The persistent presence of the maids and their palimpsestic revisions of Penelope’s story indicate an additional level of narrative justice, wherein Penelope, traditionally a figure of prudence and constancy, is implicated in the violence of the past and the constructions of guilt that she attempts to assign to others. The biases inherent in Penelope’s attempts at narrative justice generate the sense of a text that is out of balance, and it is the persistence and variety of discourses that the maids represent, in conjunction with their perpetual haunting of Penelope in Hades that leaves her in tears in the end, which restores a broad sense of equilibrium. Frye identifies that “the righting of the balance is what the Greeks called nemesis” where “the agent or instrument of nemesis may be human vengeance, ghostly vengeance, divine vengeance, divine justice, accident, fate or the logic of events, but the essential thing is that nemesis happens” (Anatomy 209). Contextualized in this way, the maids can be read as ghostly agents of nemesis, rather than righteous bearers of justice, that attempt to restore stability, an operative which is
reinforced by what Frye identifies is the traditional role of the chorus in symbolizing the “social norm,” or “the society from which the hero is gradually isolated” (218). As such, the maids, who at one time represented to Penelope a supportive community of women that were “almost like [her] sisters” (114), occupy a position that enables them to both designate Penelope’s criminal involvements as transgressions from the norm, and to inflict alienation and isolation on Penelope in order to restore the balance disrupted on account of her recalcitrant and socially deviant behaviors.

The continuing dialogism between Penelope and her maids brings to the fore several concluding, but certainly not conclusive, observations regarding the nature of justice and blame in the narrative and Penelope’s claims to jurisprudence. Similar to Laertes’s shroud, which is unwoven as it is woven, Penelope attempts to fabricate justice and to “spin a thread of [her] own” (4), yet simultaneously and unawaredly unwraps the strands of justice created by exposing the frequently purblind nature of judicious figures and processes. Penelope’s indelible acts of blindness, which enable her to retribute and “sentence” Helen for her violent transgressions while overlooking her own culpability, suggest how justice often fails to act upon the whole truth and nothing but the truth and, moreover, put into question the possibility of truth itself, but not the need to lay blame. While The Penelopiad, through its destabilization of truth, gestures toward the tendency of blame to be multiple and shared, rather than singular, this deconstructive thread does not suggest that blame is indeterminate or entirely relative. Atwood’s deep sense of injustice in response to the various atrocities described in The Penelopiad and elsewhere in her writing reveals that the questioning and disruption of truth should not negate the need to lay blame and to hold individuals accountable for their actions.201
Barbara Hudson further identifies that conceptions of justice and penalty are determined by “who has the power to say who is punished, whose ideas count” (6), thus revealing that the ostensibly universal principle of justice is underwritten by social inequalities and inequitable power dynamics. Penelope’s possession of moral and narrative authority suggests that the justice instantiated in the narrative is not done in the name of an impartial and universal abstraction, but in response to Penelope’s own perceptions and evaluations of villainy, injustice and retribution. This element of power informing justice efforts ultimately acts to blur the division between restitution and revenge, and between justice and violence. In other words, Penelope’s attempt to bring justice to Helen’s image can be seen to simultaneously satisfy Penelope’s personal vendetta against her, resultantly disfiguring, flattening and dismembering Helen’s image that was once held in its entirety as an icon of beauty. In creating new modes of violence and imagining new weapons, Penelope exemplifies the observations of the narrative speaker in Atwood’s “Women’s Novels,” who discerns that women’s stories parallel men’s stories that are about “how to get power. Killing and … winning and so on,” except that in women’s narratives, “the method is different” (Murder 34). Reflecting her assertion that “There is indeed something delightful in being able to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act” (my emphasis 117), Penelope’s acts of narrative justice reveal her moral agency as a self-serving weapon, thus destabilizing the widely held understanding of restoration and revenge, and justice and violation as mutually exclusive realities.

Yet the above discussion of The Penelopiad has suggested the ways in which power is far from singular. While the title of Atwood’s novella and the framing of the
narrative as an opportunity for Penelope to bring justice to Helen by “do[ing] a little story-making” (3) for herself intimates that narrative authority is exclusively held by Penelope and thus that all acts of justice will occur under her direction, the persistent return of the maids’ unauthorized voices through the chorus chapters identifies that while power is linked to the enactment of justice, power is ultimately multiple and manifold. The maids’ similar attempts to enact retribution in the narrative for Penelope’s own involvements in past violence expose the falsity behind perceptions of justice as a teleological concept which progresses singularly and uniformly towards an ultimate achievement of societal order. Rather, the maids’ retributive intentions reveal the tendency of justice to work in an endlessly cyclical and largely unregulated manner which indicates that justice is often not singularly and absolutely served, but continually in pursuit of an unachievable ideal of order and social harmony. As such, Atwood’s text indicates that in addition to Helen and Penelope, the concept of justice itself is put on trial in the narrative.

***

The exploration of justice and its adequacy as a response to female acts of violence is continued in the mythic mini-fictions collected in Atwood’s *The Tent*. Reflecting Sharon Rose Wilson’s observation that “Atwood’s re-visioning of patriarchal myths creates a new feminist mythology” (“Mythological Intertexts” 226), Atwood’s narratives aim to revise both cultural assumptions about womanhood, which maintain that a woman’s role in violence is as victim and witness, and classic and biblical myth plots that construct male figures as central to narrative action. Yet Atwood’s revisionist myths further engage in an *intratextual* discourse which suggests the need for a reconstruction
of ethics and an expansion of ethical modes of thought beyond justice, thereby aligning with Margaret Somerville’s assertion that “We need imagination to deal with [moral] complexity—in particular, imagination as exhibited in myth” (205). In seeking alternative moral responses to acts of female violence and aggression, Atwood’s mini-fictions move beyond an exclusive focus on traditionally masculine justice constructs, which value systems of retribution, moral autonomy and universal reasoning, in order to explore the possibility of a feminine ethics of care, which privileges sympathy, individual interconnectivity and contextual details. In doing so, such narratives illustrate how form and content often misalign, and small stories, in refusing to remain limited to small issues, deign to push past their textual limits to enter into complex ethical and moral debates. Yet similar to the failure of feminized forms of narrative justice in *The Penelopiad* to provide an ideal moral response to acts of female violence, the feminine care ethic examined in *The Tent* is repeatedly frustrated and ultimately unsuccessful in replacing traditional justice constructs with an infallible alternative. Consequently, what becomes apparent is the limitation inherent in polarizing moral responses according to gender, the recognition of guilt as a construct which is frequently shared and multiple, rather than singularly held, and the re-evaluation of singular ethical approaches to arrive at final solutions. In an article expressing her own conceptualization of myth, Atwood states that “myths can be used … as the foundation stones for new renderings” (“The Myths Series” 58), thereby suggesting her belief in the capacity of myths to perform as innovative spaces for new envisionings of ethical responses. However, a close examination of Atwood’s mini-fictions identifies that, as innovative as they may seem,
such alternative moral responses are by no means exempt from critique themselves and point to the need for further revisions.

Carol Gilligan, in her 1982 study *In a Different Voice*, revolutionized ethical discourses by insisting upon both the need to find a suitable and central place for women in theories of morals and ethical behaviors, and the necessity to expand understandings of “women’s identity formation and their moral development” (3). Responding specifically to Lawrence Kohlberg’s six-stage theory of moral development, which postulates an individual’s movement from an ego-centered conception of fairness to an impartial logic of reciprocal exchange and equity, and which consistently situates women at a lower moral rank than men, Gilligan attempted to redefine moral reasoning to reflect the traditionally female qualities of care and sympathy for others, and to find a central place for these qualities in ethical discourses. Unlike Kohlberg’s model, which conceptualizes universal and abstract principles such as justice, impartial reasoning and human rights as central to the highest stages of moral development, Gilligan’s care ethics suggests how responsiveness and receptivity to others are morally valuable and can similarly be central to moral action and decision making. Gilligan’s model of ethics is premised on the idea that women do not see moral problems as requiring impartial reason and objective logic, thus proposing that, in fundamental ways, women’s moral development follows a different trajectory of growth, and that women evaluate moral dilemmas “in a different voice.” According to Marilyn Friedman, the “characteristically ‘female,’ moral voice that Gilligan heard in her studies eschews abstract rules and principles,” and the “substantive concern for this moral voice is care and responsibility, particularly as these arise in the context of interpersonal relationships” (92).
Beyond Gilligan’s specific objections to Kohlberg’s phallocentric conceptualizations of morals and ethical development, however, Gilligan is more broadly offering a rejoinder and alternative to masculine justice ethics in interpersonal relations, the latter of which traditionally advocates abstract principles, retribution, and universal reasoning over emotions and insists upon the exclusion of partisanism and sentiment from the realm of ethics. Reiterating Gilligan’s view of the essential difference of male morality, Andrea Maihofer explains that “According to Gilligan, the ‘male’ conception of morality may be understood as an ethic of justice, while the ‘female’ conception can be seen primarily as an ethic of care” (383). For Gilligan, justice ethics, or the male moral approach, assumes that all interpersonal relationships are connections between equals, and that each individual can, and should, possess complete moral autonomy, thus allowing blame to be individually assigned. In proposing how such differences develop between the genders, Gilligan suggests that “For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity,” summarily stating that “masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment” (8). To Gilligan’s critique of justice-based ways of thinking and its focus on “separation, autonomy, individuation … natural rights” (23), blame and singular moral outcomes, Sarah Hoagland, in her “Introduction” to her study of lesbian ethics, adds that the “attraction to rules and principles comes in part from a desire to be certain and secure” in one’s decisions, and from a desire to have “everyone … conform” (11). Through such claims, Hoagland intimates that justice ethics offer a moral minimalism that values a stringent and systematic approach to the application of moral principles and rights irrespective of variations in individual character, contextual circumstances or conditions.
Pointing out the inadequacy and self-defeating mechanisms inherent in such an approach, Hoagland further posits that “Acting from principle interferes with rather than enhances our ability to make judgments” (11) in everyday moral situations. While proponents of care ethics do not specifically espouse an abandoning of justice-minded thinking in criminal trials or warn of the dangers of “Acting from principle” in state justice systems per se, care ethic theorists do appear to suggest the need for individuals to recognize and apply care and sympathy as moral responses in their everyday interpersonal relations in the hopes of transforming “conflictual relationships into cooperative ones” (Kiss, “Justice” 491) and decreasing the need for the formal judicial processes extending from justice-based modes of thought.

Gilligan offers a reconception of the individual that identifies each person not as an atomistic and rights-bearing member of a society of isolated individuals, but as an extensively connected and interdependent being. While maintaining that notions of judgment and knowledge are valuable, Gilligan proposes that many women view these principles from a different point of view, wherein the focus lies on how these elements assist individuals in evaluating their competing responsibilities within the complex web of their interpersonal relationships. Within Gilligan’s conception of ethics, the individual is primarily viewed at an intersubjective level and in a relational manner that facilitates an understanding of how subjects do not function as atomized moral agents, but rather, have deep and multiple connections with others; central to Gilligan’s moral theory is the fundamental relation between the provider and the receiver of care. Further indicating the social basis of her theory, Gilligan suggests that the solution to a moral dilemma is one that both relies not upon obedience to abstract laws, but “on a process of
communication, assuming connection and believing that [one’s] voice will be heard” (29), and which focuses on the feelings and personal responses of others in order to achieve a resolution that best affects all individuals involved. Conversely, Gilligan’s care ethic theory proposes that harm and a collapsing of moral action occurs when there is “a failure of response” (38) and individuals neglect to help others when they are capable of doing so, ultimately resulting in the breakdown of mutual responsibilities and the cohesion of a community.

In addition to reconfiguring perceptions of the individual and his/her place in society, Gilligan’s ethical model takes a revisionary look at how moral situations should be evaluated, proposing context and situational factors as elements of paramount importance to a full understanding of ethical dilemmas. Gilligan proposes that because the “moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights,” its resolution lies in “a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (19). As such, care ethics proposes that moral considerations must take into account personal relations, power imbalances, and situational circumstances before arriving at a moral evaluation. Margaret McLaren, in her evaluation of Gilligan’s model as a feminist ethic, posits that “acknowledging interdependence, inequality, and vulnerability improves on the traditional contractarian model of ethics” (104), thereby indicating how attention to contextual detail and interpersonal dynamics assists in offering a more complete understanding of the variety of forces and influences acting upon an individual at any given time, and further suggesting that an objective and detached conception of the individual may be unproductive. Resulting from this contextualization of events and individuals is an awareness of truth as multiple and
constantly shifting as new information and details about an event come to light. Through
this emphasis on context and subjectivity, truth is revealed as a construct which can only,
at best, be tentatively approximated.

Seeming to respond to her earlier observation that “‘morality’ is going to come
back in [focus] now,” but that “Unfortunately most people still aren’t too equipped to
think ethically” (“Just Looking” 123), Atwood, in her myth-based mini-fictions in The
Tent, offers an opportunity for readers to exercise ethical modes of thought without
necessarily providing readers with definitive moral answers. Aligning with Herb Wylie’s
observation that “literature can cultivate ethical engagement without positioning itself in
the role of ‘moral ideology for the modern age’” (825), and that “the ethical utility of
literary texts may well reside most of all in their lack of amenability to clear judgment …
[and] in their recurrent ambiguity” (831), Atwood’s mini-fictions encourage an
exploration of ethics that finds value in the process of ethical reasoning, rather than in the
ethical solution. While managing to avoid becoming an ideologue, or what she
disparagingly identifies as a “Pulpiteer, a preachy manipulator of two-dimensional
images, in order to ram home some … worthy message” (Negotiating 102), Atwood
depicts a range of female brutalities that evoke ethical responses from both her characters
and her readers.207 Varying from petty psychological harms to abominable acts of
infanticide, the female violence that Atwood represents becomes increasingly destructive
as the collection progresses, indicating the inaccuracy of viewing violence as an “all or
nothing” gesture, rather than a spectrum of harmful behaviors, and the necessity of
applying ethical modes of thought to all instances and magnitudes of harm.

***
Providing a further revision to the Homeric epics, “It’s Not Easy Being Half Divine” retells and updates the story of Helen of Troy through the perspective of an unnamed and elusive first-person narrator who was a childhood friend of Helen and who has since continued to foster her resentment towards her for her past and present behaviors. Within the small space provided by Atwood’s mini-fiction narrative, Helen matures from an aggressive and self-admiring young girl selling Kool-Aid off her front porch to a troubled teen seeking escape from her degenerate family and finally into a young woman who marries, and consequently becomes unfaithful to, the local police chief, indicating how Atwood is taking on expansive and loaded issues. The central acts of harm in “It’s Not Easy” are launched by Helen, who, as a child, reflects the hurtfulness and psychological cruelty of Helen in *The Penelopiad* in refusing to allow the then young narrator the privilege of carrying glasses of Kool-Aid to ostensibly admiring customers, forcefully claiming this privilege for herself and leaving the narrator years later to indignantly recall how Helen “always had to be the one to carry the glass down the steps, eyelids lowered and with that pink bow in her hair” (*my emphasis* 47). More precisely, the narrator’s hurt stems not from her inability to entertain customers *per se*, but from her repeated exclusion from aspects of Helen’s play, calling to mind the cruel girlhood games of exclusion similarly depicted in *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood’s unpublished manuscript of “A Stack of Plates,” and *Lady Oracle*, in which Joan recalls such “game[s] very well” and is “astonished at how much [she] still resent[s]” (230) such harms. Reflecting Iris Chase’s observation in *The Blind Assassin* that “Women have curious ways of hurting someone else … they do it so the [individual] doesn’t even know [she/he has] been hurt until much later” (276), the narrator is only in retrospect able to understand the “pain” (47) and
cruelty enacted through Helen’s gesture and to connect it with the larger and more harmful violence that unfolds.

In conjunction with her continuing affair with “some man from the city who was passing through” (48), Helen’s flaunting of her infidelity before her “hurt” (49) husband and her disparaging public remarks about him evince her continuing acts of cruelty and harm as a grown woman. By the end, Helen’s renowned act of indirect violence in causing the Trojan War is gestured towards in the narrator’s observation that a violent altercation between the police chief’s “big family” (49) and Helen’s new lover is pending. Yet the repeated description of Helen as a fisherwoman suggest that her public disgracing of the chief and her efforts to brandish her present happiness are acts which are intended to lure the chief into action, thus yoking together what initially appear as isolated acts of violence. The closing of the narrative imparts to the reader that several characters are on the verge of a major battle to be fought over, and because of, Helen, therein leaving the reader to examine the illusion sustained in Homer that men’s violence is exclusively about blood-thirsty men and confirming Ellen O’Gorman’s suggestion that the figure of Helen prompts us to scrutinize “the margins of war, margins inhabited by women” (200). Yet in many ways, the brevity of Atwood’s mini-fiction requires readers to look beyond the narrative in order to gain a broader understanding of the text; Reingard Nischik similarly finds that the “highly intertextual nature” of these narratives “creates networks of meaning and significance despite their limited scope” (“Margaret Atwood’s Short” 153). Thus, in turning to Homer in order to fill in and substantiate the gaps left behind by Atwood’s narrative, the reader is left with the sense that the imminent
violence of the police chief and his men is inevitable, and has, in some capacity, already occurred. Helen, as it were, is always already guilty.

The justice responses to Helen’s acts of psychological violence in boldly displaying her infidelity and resultant happiness after abruptly leaving the police chief are enacted, appropriately, by the male characters. Unlike Homer’s ancient depictions of Helen, the Helen represented here is situated within a contemporary society holding modern legal systems, yet, significantly, such infrastructures are rejected in favor of a vigilante and informal justice not unlike the early archaic justice systems used during the eighth century B.C. Helen’s police chief husband, presumably viewed as a figurehead of conventional justice structures within his community, foregoes an appeal to such formal systems in order to pursue less official, yet similarly sequential and on some level perhaps more gratifying, justice measures by planning to gather “a posse, go into the city, smoke them out, beat the guy up, get her back, smack her around a bit” (48). The inevitable violence such acts would incur is suggested by the narrator’s observation that the chief’s men all have “muscles and tempers” and by her concluding prediction that “things will get serious” (49), a prognosis which, on a metafictive level, insists on the gravity of myths. Moreover, the violence that Helen will be exposed to during the chief’s attack both appears as an unexpected outcome resulting from her act of indirect violence and suggests how, particularly in such instances of secondary harm, divisions between the victim and victimizer break down.

In claiming his desire “to stand for the right values” (49), the police chief demonstrates his willingness to enact great harm in pursuit of justice—since it is often those who believe they are taking moral action that are most violent in battle—and his
subjective definition of the “right” defended through his justice behaviors. Marilyn Friedman, in her reading of Gilligan, illustrates the centrality of such abstractions to justice morality when she states that the traditionally “‘male,’” moral voice … derives moral judgments about particular cases from abstract, universalized moral rules and principles” (92). Moreover, the chief’s pursuit of justice and his planning of an attack upon Helen and her lover signal the loss of a sense of proportionality that typically occurs during periods of social instability and the tendency of traditional justice structures to enact what David Cayley views as a “compounding of old violence with new violence” (11). Drawing on the ideas of Roy Porter, Sarah Sceats similarly argues that “western society has traditionally taken a punitive attitude towards the body, being ever ready to mortify or torment the flesh, particularly in the name of religion or justice” (61).

The turn towards an ethics of care as an alternative to justice measures is variously signaled in Atwood’s text by the female narrator who, despite the harms she sustained by Helen and her desire to see Helen brought to justice, displays towards her a degree of sympathy central to care ethic responses. The proportionately large number of lines dedicated to Helen’s various justifications for her actions is significant, especially in light of the constricted space of the narrative. In particular, Helen’s defense of her adultery as an act undertaken in search of self-fulfillment is sympathetically received by the narrator, given her own pursuit of completion and closure in finally redressing wrongs done to her, enabling her to understand how female violence can be a self-preservative and self-declarative, or communicative, gesture. Vanessa Friedman similarly suggests that women’s harmful transgressions enact “an articulation in a social order where she perceives herself as misunderstood. She may feel unrepresented by a language in which
she is not allowed her own voice or original words” (my emphasis 63). When considered in relation to Atwood’s story, Friedman’s observations reveal how acts can approximate voice, and how proof of Helen’s subjectivity is demonstrated through her violent rather than verbal gestures, the latter of which have been traditionally denied to her.

In addition to the narrator’s attempts to justify Helen’s behaviors and to destabilize Helen’s claims to a divine lineage—the latter being an endeavor which, if successful, would ultimately result in bringing Helen down to a fully human level and rejoining her with a human community that she has becoming increasingly detached from on account of her ostensibly divine birth, delinquent upbringing and recent infamy—her efforts to contextualize Helen’s present behaviors and identity, rather than viewing them as isolated phenomena, further reflects her orientation towards an ethic of care. The narrator’s emphasis on contextual detail when evaluating the moral implications of Helen’s behavior should not be mistaken for her pursuit of moral relativity, which suggests that morality is simply a social construction that, like society, shifts with changes in time and place. Marilyn Friedman, in aiming to clarify this distinction, suggests that “sensitivity to contextual detail need not carry with it the relativistic view that there simply are no moral rights and wrongs,” but rather “need only reflect uncertainties about just which principles to apply to a particular case, or a concern that one does not yet have sufficient knowledge to apply one’s principles” (114-5). Despite the hurt she endured, and seemingly continues to endure, on account of the cruelties enacted by Helen, the narrator’s detailed account of the dubious occupation of Helen’s single mother, and the “goings-on at night” (48) in Helen’s childhood home, suggesting Helen’s mother’s involvement in the sex trade, provides contextual details which help to
explain Helen’s previous hurtful behaviors towards the narrator. In excluding the narrator from certain aspects of her play, and in insisting upon her exclusive rights to solicit the attention of their Kool-Aid customers, Helen mimes the behaviors of her mother, presumably servicing the same clientele that visits her mother in the after-hours. Beyond learning the multivalent use of the home as simultaneously a place of work, rest, and play, Helen, through her unavoidable observations of her mother’s work, has learned the dual-functioning of the body as the physical manifestation of self and a consumable commodity. The additional references to the perpetual absence of Helen’s father, and to the early absconding of Helen’s two brothers, further function to contextualize Helen’s unsuccessful relationships with men such as the police chief, and reveal the narrator’s understanding, on some level, of what Marilyn Friedman insists is the “role of situational detail in moral reasoning” (118).

Yet the principles and central tenets of an ethics of care are challenged and undermined in Atwood’s narrative, suggesting that an ethical model based on mutual responsibility and interconnectivity holds its own inadequacies and is at times an inappropriate means of achieving a broader understanding of human morality. In particular, Gilligan’s essential assertion that “the self and the other are interdependent” (74) and her understanding that a woman’s developing subjectivity is inseparable from, and thus unavoidably influenced by, other individuals within her community, become problematic, considering what Roberta Rubenstein describes as the typically “inhospitable environment” offered in Atwood’s fiction “in which the female identity must discover itself” (112). Through the title of her narrative alone, Atwood intimates that not all communities offer an ethos of cohesion and support, and Atwood further
depicts the community surrounding Helen, wherein her father is absent, her brothers have run away, and her mother remains absorbed in her own affairs, as one where the only consistencies are fragmentation and abandonment. Indeed, Helen herself continues this pattern in leaving home early to marry young, and then deserting her commitments to the police chief at the first opportunity, thus implying that community cannot be taken as a given in all, or even most, circumstances. Gilligan herself acknowledges that “in order to be able to care for another, one must first be able to care responsibly for oneself” (76), suggesting the “primacy of … survival” (75) underlying her moral theory, yet, unfortunately, Gilligan leaves unaddressed the question of how to initiate an ethics of care in the absence of any semblance of a continuing community, or the individual’s ability to forge one. Does the absence of community or an ability to participate in it suggest an inability to act morally? Furthermore, how does an ethics of care account for the instantiating and enabling of violence because of one’s strong affiliation with a community, as occurs in the case of the police chief and his men? In large part, Gilligan’s care ethics fails to acknowledge how interpersonal relations often generate biases, and can lead us to commit a wrong believing it is a good deed done on the behalf of those we love, revealing how interpersonal relations are deeper and more complex than Gilligan’s theory allows.

***

Similar to “It’s Not Easy,” “Salome Was a Dancer” is a myth-based narrative that both examines how conventional and alternative ethical responses are variously constructed following an event of female violence and exposes the gaps that singular moral responses leave behind. Mary Louise Pratt’s well-known essay “The Short Story:
“It’s Not Easy,” examines the cultural hierarchy in which the novel is given greater value relative to the short story and the reputation of the short story “as a training or practice genre, for both apprentice writers and apprentice readers” (97). While Pratt is here referring to the learning and practice of writing itself, this idea of the short story as a “practice genre” is carried forward and adapted, rather than disputed, by Atwood in her use of short fiction to provide readers with an arena within which to exercise and develop morally-focused methods of reading, further shedding light on the ways in which Atwood is re-investing short fiction with cultural value, and utilizing the short narrative form as an experimental space for imagining alternative moral perspectives and their limitations.

In her contemporary re-vision of the biblical myth of Salome, Atwood depicts Salome as a young girl whose attempts to improve her Religious Studies grade by becoming sexually involved with the teacher result in unwelcome repercussions after they are caught in the stockroom together. The ensuing scandal leads to the public shaming and societal death of the Religious Studies teacher, whom Salome accuses of sexual assault, and the physical death of Salome, who leaves home to become an erotic dancer and is soon after murdered in her dressing room. Further resonant of both the Old Testament narrative of Judith and Holofernes and the film *The Red Shoes*, “Salome Was a Dancer” appears as a deeply intertextual narrative that challenges readers to undertake a moral inquiry in response to acts of female violence that are often as debatable as they are deadly.

Salome’s capacity for violence is evident in the false accusation of sexual assault she levels at her Religious Studies teacher, a brutality that Atwood aligns with the
biblical Salome’s orders for John the Baptist’s beheading, given its effect of causing the teacher to forfeit his job and to “Los[e] his head completely” (“Salome” 53). However, unlike the biblical Salome, who appears as a passive instrument of indirect violence that enables her mother, Herodias, to achieve her murderous schemes, Atwood’s Salome is portrayed as more directly accountable for the harm enacted. The narrator’s observation that “you always knew with Salome that if anyone’s head was going to roll it wouldn’t be hers” (53), suggests that Salome’s violence, like Helen’s, is rooted in her insistence on self-preservation at all costs and her acceptance of brutality as an unavoidable reality. Taken together, this twofold focus on the effect and motivation of violence suggests Atwood’s recognition of the need to consider both the victim and the victimizer in defining violence, and to recognize violence as both that which stems from malicious intent and that which produces harm. Radically revising and ironically participating in the biblical account of Salome, in which Herodias embodies the mind capable of imagining great violence and Salome remains unnamed as she performs the role of the instrumental body conscripted to carry forth the violent command, together symbolizing the traditional belief that the violent woman must necessarily hold a fractured identity, Atwood’s revision of the myth insists on the importance of calling Salome into being by employing her name as the first word of the narrative, and by conjoining the violent female body with the violent female mind. In granting Salome a more complete subjectivity than she is offered in biblical accounts, Atwood exemplifies her firm belief that bad women in literature “should not mean, but be” (“The Curse” 222).

Yet despite the violence Salome ostensibly enacts in the narrative and her reiteration of biblical events, Atwood’s narrator emphasizes the ambiguity surrounding
her character. Similar to the multi-layered Tinker Bell costume the narrator recalls her wearing in the school play, Salome is sheathed in layers of meaning that complicate attempts to assign blame. More specifically, although the narrator prefaces her account by insisting on the intentionality and agency behind Salome’s decisions to manipulate the Religious Studies teacher and to “[go] to work on the guy” (52), the stockroom incident, in which “[Salome] had her shirt off” and “The teacher was growling away at her bra” (52), ambiguously appears as both the materialization of Salome’s predatory intentions with the teacher and the teacher’s sexual assault of Salome. In short, the sexual violation is clear, but the identities of the victim and victimizer remain uncertain. Additionally, the discovery of Salome’s murdered body wearing “nothing … but her black leather macramé bikini and that steel-studded choke collar” (54), which calls to mind both Offred’s sighting of Moira at Jezebel’s wearing a strapless “black outfit … wired from the inside, pushing up the breasts … a black bow tie around her neck” (The Handmaid’s Tale 224) and the implied bodily violation of “young and pretty girls” (“Something Has Happened” 131) elsewhere in The Tent, further reinforces suspicions of Salome’s sexual exploitation. Such ambiguity demonstrates the complexity of moral characterization and situates Salome as a confounded figure of both violence and victimization, freedom and constraint.

As such, attempts to use justice ethics to respond to the violence in the narrative are staged for failure, since justice theories traditionally rely upon the existence of a comprehensive truth and Atwood does not have one to offer. While the pursuit of truth (or its approximation) is, of course, not the only aim of justice efforts, the belief in a substantive truth of events has shaped the practices of judicial institutions, and enabled
a faith in their capacity to order and determine the past.217 Framed in this way, the conviction of the Religious Studies teacher for the charge of sexual assault can be regarded as a potentially misplaced declaration of guilt stemming from a judicial framework that aims to resolve ambiguity, rather than keep it intact. In “thr[owing] his weight around” (53), Salome’s influential stepfather helps to ensure that such final judgments of justice, irrespective of their potential fallibility, are made and made to stay, reflecting Elaine’s observation in Cat’s Eye that retributory justice and the pursuit of “An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness” (405). What is made clear, however, is that within this growing web of blindness, one of the most detrimental oversights is that of the judicature and its failure to recognize, or entertain the possibility of, women’s violence, revealing what Patricia Pearson describes as the “collective amnesia” (156) and the “remarkable denial that female predators exist” (157). Moreover, while justice theories assume that the proper state of a society is reinstated and justice is served in the punishment delivered by the court, Atwood exposes how legal sentences are silently compounded and extended by various unauthorized social forces which work to sentence the teacher to social isolation, homelessness and insanity long after his official sentence has been served.

That Atwood is exploring alternative responses to female violence is made evident in the opening lines of “Salome,” in which the narrator suggests an orientation towards an ethics of care by focusing on the emotional impact of violence and proposing that Salome’s exploitation of the teacher “was really mean of her” (51), an evaluation made more prominent through its repetition verbatim a few lines later. While inveighing against the teacher’s “droning on about morality and so forth” (51), the narrator’s early
evaluation of Salome’s acts as “mean” draws the reader into a moral realm that recommends the use of sympathy in responding to harmful acts and reflects what Marilyn Friedman describes as the tendency of individuals following the principles of care ethics to “seek the detail that makes the suffering clear” (93). Contrasting with the pursuit of justice to ascertain the facts of reality “beyond a reasonable doubt,” the narrator of “Salome” further defers truth and certainty, where the repetition of the conjunction “but” in the opening paragraph, and the narrator’s use of conjunctive structures to see from multiple perspectives the relationship between Salome and the teacher, reveals her awareness that there will always be conflicting points of view and complicating factors that render singular moral judgments problematic. For both the narrator and Gilligan, fair moral evaluation entails continually questioning presumptions, focusing “on the limitations of any particular resolution and describ[ing] the conflicts that remain” (Gilligan 22). Related to this understanding is the narrator’s growing recognition of the constructed nature of her own narrative, signaled in her increasing use of uncertain phrases such as “I guess” (51, 52), “your guess is as good as mine” (52), and “so the story goes” (52-53). The narrator’s refusal to offer herself as arbiter of truth and her recognition of the fallibility and situatedness of all knowers demonstrates her preference for regarding truth as a function of context and individual perspective, rather than as a monolithic and singular reality.

However, in disentangling and examining the moral conundrums depicted in “Salome,” the narrator seems further aware of how an ethics based on care and responsibility is similarly open to critique and reassessment. While Gilligan idealizes care as “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need” (my emphasis 62),
Atwood’s narrator recognizes the potential to subversively employ and offer care for another in order to achieve individualistic, rather than mutually beneficial, goals, reflecting Kiss’s stance that the idealizations set forth by an ethics of care are at times “wildly unrealistic” (491). More specifically, the narrator demonstrates an awareness of how Salome has seen, and is in turn responding to, the sexual needs of the teacher, who “finger[s] the grapefruits in the supermarket in this creepy way” (51). Artificially engaging in care and exploiting the needs of her teacher in order to improve her academic standing, Salome demonstrates how “feminine virtues” are often “developed as strategies for manipulating and gaining control in a relationship of dominance and subordination” (Hoagland 100).

The construction of care as an ethical principle is further unsettled by the narrator herself, who, despite her role as moral evaluator, must also be evaluated for her behaviors and her use of care in discriminatory and harmful ways. Conceptualizations of care have been examined by Margaret McLaren as a way for women to achieve power within a patriarchal society, and by Hoagland as a means of “manipulating and gaining control.” yet Atwood’s narrative exemplifies how care constructs can alternately be seen to perpetuate women’s subordination. Although “Salome” reveals the inability of care ethics to describe the moral perspectives of all, or even most, women and the damage caused by reinforcing essentialist constructions of gender, this mini-fiction further identifies how the narrator sympathizes with and offers care to the male characters, yet does so at the cost of excluding women from her sympathies. More specifically, the narrator’s subtle acts of misogyny in coldly referring to Salome’s death as “too bad for Management” (53), and in painting a denigratory image of Salome’s mother as exploitative of Salome’s
childhood beauty, contrast starkly with her palliative description of the teacher’s potential molestation of Salome as an event “you have to laugh [at]” (53) and her commiserating with the teacher after his being charged with sexual assault, leniently referring to him as a “poor jerk” that “looks like Jesus” (53). The narrator’s final statement, in which she declares that “It was all the mother’s fault, if you ask me” (54), illustrates both the narrator’s appeal to justice principles, which are inclined towards the objective placement of blame, and her simultaneous alignment with care ethic principles through her focus on the subjectivity of truth. The deferred narrative closure suggested by this tension between moral systems illustrates that the moral imperatives typically contained within myths, and what Armstrong identifies as their ability to “[put] us in the correct … posture for right action” (4), are not as simple as they may initially seem.

***

The shifting ethical discourses woven through Atwood’s myth revisions demonstrate how moral discourses and myths are perpetually open to new evaluations, and reveal that while Atwood may regard “fiction writing [a]s the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community” (“An End” 346), the moral gate-keeper function must allow interpretations both in and out. Atwood’s effort to intertwine both ethical and myth perspectives within a single narrative is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in “Nightingale,” where female violence appears in its most unsettling form and easy moral responses are eschewed in favor of those which hold ethical ambivalences intact. Revisiting and revising the myth of Philomel and Procne most famously recounted in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, “Nightingale” reverses the experiences of the two sisters to tell how Philomel is visited one night by the tortured ghost of her sister Procne, recalling
the description in *Lady Oracle* of Joan’s midnight visitations from her deceased mother, who similarly suffered “life [as] her curse” (330). The purpose of Procne’s visit is to remind Philomel of the horrors she endured as hostage of Tereus, whose name is never mentioned, but whose identity as the husband of both women is clearly implied. Told from the first-person perspective of Philomel, the narrative reveals Procne’s feelings of betrayal over her sister’s knowledge of the violence enacted upon her, and her sister’s failure to respond to, or attempt to prevent, such horrific acts.

The immensity of violence described in the narrative is achieved not only by the monstrous acts of violence in themselves, but also by the number of individuals participant in them. Beyond Tereus’s detainment of Procne in an isolated shack and his mutilation of her body in cutting out her tongue, Philomel’s refusal to respond to Tereus’s violence as such, and her ultimately unconvincing denial of Procne’s mutilation as “a lie” used to cover Procne’s “decision not to speak” (136), challenge conventional understandings of harm, and expand definitions of violence to include brutalities engendered through inaction. Reflecting Hoagland’s assertion that “turning the other cheek is an act of violence” (107), Linda Bell finds that “inaction generally is tantamount to action” and suggests the danger in “Conflating inaction with not acting and thereby placing it beyond the purview of ethics” (34), where in doing so we overlook how not acting to end or divert violence “affirms its acceptability and makes one an accomplice of a sort” (37). Similar to the actions of the character in “The Tent,” who is only identified through the second person pronoun “you,” and who crouches inside the tent to deny the existence of “people … howling” (*The Tent* 143) outside, the violence Philomel
enacts in choosing *not* to act exemplifies how female violence is committed in a variety of interactions that do not necessarily involve direct physical exchanges, yet at times do.

Contrasting with the violence committed by Philomel is that of Procne, who directly inflicts agony and death on the body of her victim, in this case her son, and in doing so undermines cultural beliefs which maintain that women who commit violence do so by acting as men, since in Atwood’s narrative the female murderer is simultaneously a paradigm of femininity: the mother. Procne’s disturbingly subtle admission of her brutality in holding out her bloodied hands to Philomel is disarming, given the magnitude of horror implied when Procne confesses, “Our son … I couldn’t stop myself” (137). The monstrosity of this violent act is again instated in the story’s closing through the unnamed witness figure, identified in the concluding paragraph as the “man standing underneath [the] tree,” who is rendered nearly speechless and with the ability to produce but one word: “Grief” (138). Removed from the world of sacrifice, in which the pain and suffering of death promises redemptive and often rejuvenatory ends, the violence Procne enacts is largely self-appeasing and responds to her own repression and victimization, recalling the female poet in Atwood’s short story “Lives of the Poets” whose prolonged oppression and accumulating rage lead her to imagine that “she will open her mouth and the room will explode in blood” (*Dancing* 209).

Yet the acts of violence represented in Atwood’s narrative are never simply acts of violence. Rather, they exist as multivalent gestures that refuse singular meaning or easy moral evaluation. Similar to the police chief in “It’s Not Easy,” who by the end is planning a violent attack upon Helen and her lover that will uphold “right values” (49), Procne’s murder of her son simultaneously performs acts of retribution and informal
justice against her husband. However, Procne’s violent actions, like those of the chief, additionally signal the potential of violent means, even those intended to restore order and “right,” to exceed the ends they aim to achieve. Hannah Arendt’s assertion that the real threat of politically motivated violence is that “the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it” (4), illustrates how the pursuit of justice in Atwood’s narrative, and Procne’s horrific use of her son as a means to an end, result in an erasure of the original judicially-oriented goals.

Procne’s reference to her violent acts as “mistakes” and her claiming of a personal loss in identifying her victim as “Our son” (my emphasis 137), exemplify the dangers inherent in conflating justice and violence and the potential of justice acts to become mutually devastating.

While less ambiguous than the violence found in Atwood’s other mini-fictions, the brutality described in “Nightingale” similarly functions to evoke diverse and shifting ethical responses which reveal the difficulty inherent in thinking ethically. Moreover, Atwood’s refusal to align with a single ideology or orthodox moral perspective does not imply her rejection of moral ideologies in their entirety, but rather, her understanding of the need to use constructed moralities with an awareness of the biases of any ideological system; in an interview with Linda Sandler, Atwood admits her caution in using theories given her recognition of “their limits,” yet further states that, despite this, “theories are useful for teaching” (52).223 Appearing as a palimpsest of moral stances, “Nightingale” layers justice responses with care ethic approaches, where the latter is in many ways most clearly signaled by textual inversions. Atwood’s reversal of the experiences of Philomel and Procne suggests her recognition of the value of viewing others empathetically, and of
projecting ourselves in order to see the world from another’s point of view and through another’s experiences, once again highlighting the potential usefulness of projective strategies. In falling short of this ideal and demonstrating the tension between form and content characteristic of Atwood’s mini-fiction, Philomel’s refusal to help Procne escape her torture—an event which Procne, in stating, “You knew … You repressed it, but you must have known” (135), insists Philomel was aware of—signals how adopting empathetic perspectives and acting morally through care often propose a difficult challenge. Further, Philomel’s turning a blind eye to her sister’s torments indicates how, within an ethics of care, immoral acts occur following “a failure of response” (Gilligan 38) and when one is unwilling to help others when one has had the opportunity to do so. The centrality of care to the maintenance of community and the breakdown of interpersonal relations in its absence is demonstrated by the blatantly hostile and accusatory conversation that unfolds between Philomel and Procne, and the fragmentation of connection which results from Philomel’s failure to assist, and abandonment of, her sister.

Within the worlds of both myth and reality, however, there of course arise conflicts to which there are no simple solutions or easy moral evaluations. Care ethic theories acknowledge that, in some situations, harm will inevitably be enacted and that “When no option exists that can be construed as being in the best interest of everybody, when responsibilities conflict and decision entails the sacrifice of somebody’s needs, then the woman confronts the seemingly impossible task of choosing the victim” (Gilligan 80). Similar to Atwood’s awareness of the restrictions inherent to constructed moral theories, Gilligan’s assertion suggests the need for care ethicians to hold a meta-
awareness of the limits of any moral system of thought, and of the possibility of irresolvable moral dilemmas in which an individual’s responsibilities to self, family and others in general come into conflict. Central to such an awareness is the acknowledgment that an unambiguously “good” solution is not always attainable. Framed in this way, Philomel’s failure to help Procne, while potentially viewed as an immoral act within an ethics of care, can also be regarded as an impossible moral dilemma that will unavoidably result in some degree of victimization. In justifying her decision to marry Procne’s husband and implicitly vindicating her failure to attempt the rescue of Procne, Philomel proclaims: “I had to ... I had to get married. He raped me. What else could I have done?” (136). Here, Philomel’s protestations reveal how her obligations to defend her sister’s marriage and safety are incompatible with her obligations to herself, and to her own sanity and security. Philomel’s decision to pursue her own needs over those of her sister, while perhaps initially appearing as narcissistic, was by no means easy; her consequent apology to Procne and her admission that “None of us behaved very well” (136) reveals Philomel’s recognition of the harm resultant from her actions. Tereus’s rape of Philomel, a violence Procne intimates was also enacted upon her, complicates Philomel’s moral agency in choosing Tereus over Procne as an act of both assertion and fearful response. The paradox underlying Philomel’s decision to marry Tereus is that her effort to preserve her honor also ensures the perpetual reminder of her shame.

Instantiating Armstrong’s observation that the “most powerful myths are about extremity; they force us to go beyond our experience” (3), “Nightingale” delivers readers into a world in which they are faced with the problem of how to proceed in response to female violence when both traditional and alternative systems of morality are exposed as
inadequate to the dilemmas posed. Despite the early presence of structured and logical “if-then” statements in the opening paragraph of “Nightingale,” in which Philomel describes the customary spaces of ghostly visitations by stating that, “If a room, there’s often a window; if a window, there will be curtains ... Never venetian blinds” (my emphasis 133), the narrative quickly enters into complex moral situations which exceed basic logical formulas and which require the postponement of singular moral judgment. Reflecting her use of myths as windows into ethical modes of thinking, rather than as receptacles holding moral answers, Atwood, in a recent review, explains that, with some narratives, “you don’t ask How will it all turn out? since that isn’t the point” (“In the Heart” 58). Philomel’s closing description of her narrative as “the story of the story of the story” (138) indicates the multiple revisions at work in “Nightingale,” which include the re-imagining of myth, gender, and short fiction traditions that Atwood knows will be themselves subject to later re-writings, given that every writer is part of a “community of storytellers that stretches back through time” (“Nine Beginnings” 108) as well as into the future.225 Yet Philomel’s suggestion of palimpsestic revision perhaps most importantly points to the new renderings of alternative and conventional ethics offered through the text, and demonstrates how all constructed narratives, including those of ethics, are continually open to re-interpretation.

More broadly, Atwood, in engaging with and revealing the limits of both conventional male justice and alternative female moral discourses, permits her myth-based fiction in The Penelopiad and The Tent to occupy multiple moral positions simultaneously and prevents her writing from appearing polemical and thus speaking to, rather than with, the reader on the topic of female violence. By soliciting an engagement
with moral discourses, Atwood’s narratives encourage a questioning of who constructs ethical systems and upon what principles, and even invite the interrogation of ethics itself as a way in which “thinking, feeling, and acting are normativized, censored and disciplined, as well as constituted” (Maihofer 391). Moreover, the seamless movement between official and unofficial moral systems ties seemingly disparate moral processes together, suggesting both the need to look within and beyond moral paradigms in seeking responses to women’s violence and the problematic short-sightedness of any effort to separate moral approaches into mutually exclusive and independent realms. The resultant effect is not moral disorder, but a moral integration in which ethical tensions are held intact and autonomous moral perspectives are refused on account of the large gaps and inconsistencies they leave behind. What Atwood espouses is not the relinquishing of moral ideologies tout court, but an abandonment of the uncritical use of established moral systems. Extending the New Critic’s understanding of the literary short story as a form which “leave[s] a ponderable residue of irresolution” (Davey “Genre Subversion” 140), Atwood’s mini-fiction offers tentativeness and hesitancy as the very material of narrative closure, where the failure to apply a singular moral system is simultaneously the greatest success in allowing the text to reveal the inherent limitations of isolated moral approaches. In her 1993 Address to the American Booksellers Association, Atwood laments that when women are forced to behave according to the dictates of gender convention, they “are deprived of moral choice.” Yet Atwood’s recent myth fictions reveal her growing awareness that broadened moral choice does not necessarily imply an answer to the question of women’s place within structures of morality. Likewise, the development of narrative justice and women’s care ethics orientations does not mean that
women should rest assured and cease to pursue new moral understandings. While the reader may seek definitive ethical answers that enable a moral response to the evocative and difficult issue of female violence, Atwood, as might be expected, has none to offer.

Notes

184 For an elaboration of this point, see Sharon R. Wilson’s “Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood’s Works.”
185 In a recent interview with Ian Brown, Atwood identifies the short fictional works contained in The Tent as “mini-fictions,” providing some resolution to critical debates that have variously identified Atwood’s short works as “the Baudelairean prose poem” (Nischik “Murder” 6) or as “short-short, sudden, or flash fiction” (Wilson “Fiction” 18).
186 While Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey mutually describe the Trojan War, which scholars estimate took place in the 13th or 12th century BC during the Mycenaean era, it is widely accepted that Homer composed his epic poems centuries later during a period falling between 750-700 BC. Additionally, while the events of the Odyssey historically took place during a different historical era, the historical environment of the poem is that of Homer’s own day, thus suggesting that Penelope’s retrospective narrative in The Penelopiad reflects the archaic, rather than Mycenaean, period.
187 See Odyssey 21. 311-343, where Penelope insists upon the equal opportunity of all her suitors in the bow challenge she proposes.
188 In addition to Penelope, the ability of Arete, queen of Skheria, to settle men’s disputes in the Odyssey (7.71-73) suggests that women’s capacities for justice and fair judgment were not entirely uncommon during the archaic period and that, despite the traditional associations of justice with the masculine realm, women were accepted and at times honored for their judicious abilities (Odyssey 7.66-70).
189 Lillian Eileen Doherty confirms that, in the Homeric tradition, “neither Helen nor the Sirens are punished … for their alleged treachery” (87), a reality that Elisabeth Meier Tetlow explains in part by pointing to the fact that “the kingship of Menelaos [Helen’s husband] was matrilineal and matrilocal. Helen was the daughter and heir of the former king of Sparta. Menelaos became king of Sparta through his marriage to Helen. If he lost her completely, he would also lose his throne. After the war, Menelaos could not put Helen to death for the same reason” (15).
190 Penelope’s claim here is one previously supported in the Odyssey by Helen, who appears to lament “the blindness which Aphrodite sent me when she brought me to Troy from my own dear country and made me forsake my daughter, my bridal chamber, and a husband” (4.261-264).
191 Despite her indirect acts of violence, Helen’s repeated use of the adverb “because” in the aforementioned examples insists on the direct and causal relationship between her actions and the resultant destruction.
192 Beyond their surface similarities, Atwood’s humanization of Circe is intended to encourage reader’s sympathy for her, while Penelope’s efforts to prove Helen’s human ancestry are intended to establish her culpability, and to place her within the reach of
human justice. For an elaboration on Circe’s transformation, see Sherrill Grace’s *Violent Duality* (71).

While Helen’s words are undoubtedly damaging, Helen’s attempt to suggest contrast here is, to a certain extent, a failure, since Penelope refuses Helen’s claims to divine lineage, and Zeus, like Icarus of Sparta, was similarly capable of inglorious violence towards women, as demonstrated by his rape of Leda.

While Penelope operates as moral agent in the *Odyssey*, Atwood draws attention to, and Penelope herself acknowledges, the fact that such a role was always complicated and frequently underwritten by Penelope’s simultaneous functioning as a moral object whose modesty and “edifying legend” were used in a figurative manner as a “stick … to beat other women with” (2). For Atwood’s further discussion on this matter, see her essay “Spotty-Handed Villainesses” (168).

Atwood confirms Cooke’s observations while offering a catalogue of her diverse motivations for writing, in which she reveals her similarity to Penelope and Iris by admitting that narration allows her to “satisfy [her] desire for revenge” and to create identities “that [will] survive death” (*Negotiating* xx, xxii).

Penelope’s mother’s advice closely resembles the counsel Reenie offers Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, in which she asserts that, “there’s always more than one way to skin a cat … If you can’t go through, go around” (501).

Additionally, Linda Lee Clader contends that representations of Helen prior to Homer’s epics in cult and religious contexts identified her as a divine nature goddess who was “closely connected with fertility, with the power of growth” (71), an identity which Gregory Nagy maintains became “vulnerable … once it got exposed to narrative traditions belonging to Hellenic cultures” (xii). Clader’s and Nagy’s suggestion of the mutation Helen’s early identity underwent in the face of cultural shifts, when considered alongside the post-Homeric changes in Helen’s image noted by Suzuki, indicates that Helen’s representation has been variously altered throughout history and that Atwood is participant in, and continuing, a historic trend of Helen’s shifting cultural identity.

In her interview with Aritha van Herk, Atwood candidly states that both Penelope and Odysseus “are famously proficient liars” (“A Practical”), adding that her re-writing of the *Odyssey* was, in part, an opportunity to investigate this aspect of their personalities.

See *Negotiating with the Dead* (48).

In “Circe/Mud Poems,” Atwood similarly depicts Penelope as guilty of extramarital relations in her description of how, during Odysseus’s absence, Penelope’s after dinner conversations are accompanied by “tea and sex / dispensed graciously both at once” (65). For example, Atwood, in a short exposé describing her writing of *The Penelopiad*, states that she was inspired to revise Homer’s myth because “the hanging of the 12 ‘maids’—slaves, really—at the end of *The Odyssey* seemed to me unfair at first reading, and seems so still” (“The Myths Series and Me”).

Sarah Hoagland suggests that “Regardless of whether we take the euphemistic description of justice as fairness or the blatant assessment of justice as the right to cruelty … justice ultimately is tied to punishment” (262), and René Girard similarly argues that “principles of justice … are in no real conflict with the concept of revenge” (16).
203 For an example of how Atwood aligns with Hoagland’s observation that individuals seek moral rules and precepts as a means of security, see Atwood’s interview with Alan Twigg.

204 Similarly, justice ethics are not wholly opposed to an ethics of care, and at times appear to incorporate such moral perspectives. For example, André du Toit and Albie Sachs maintain that forms of “restorative justice” view the offender in a community context, and are “concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships—with healing, harmony and reconciliation” (qtd. in Kiss, “Moral Ambition” 69). Likewise, proponents of rehabilitation through criminal punishment argue that unlawful individuals are a “symptom of a social disease” and thus, that “society ought to provide [their] treatment” (Banks 116). However, despite these intersections between justice and care based morality, theorists such as Michel Foucault have remained skeptical of ostensibly humanitarian approaches to justice that, in the past, have not aimed “to punish less, but to punish better … to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body” (82).

205 Gilligan adds that “Once obligation extends to include the self as well as others, the disparity between selfishness and responsibility dissolves” (94).

206 Attempting to exemplify how not all moral approaches are created equal within a patriarchal society, and to show that varying social values typically become linked with different moral approaches, Gilligan points out that women’s deference to others “is rooted not only in their social subordination but also in the substance of their moral concern. Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own,” thus revealing how women’s “moral weakness” is “inseparable from [their] moral strength” (16).

207 The disparate forms of female violence that Atwood explores in her mini-fiction instantiate Laura Robinson’s observation that Atwood is “committed to questioning the use and abuse of power on a variety of levels” (151).

208 For an example of this vigilante and community based mode of justice in Homer’s Odyssey, see 24. 411-471.

209 The inherent separation of divine figures from their surrounding community is similarly suggested by the self-proclaimed god conversing with the female speaker in “Bottle,” who, while utterly unconvincing in other respects, is certainly correct in suggesting that divine, or soon-to-be divine figures, are “not like everyone else” (9).

210 Responding to the cultural hierarchy that increasingly differentiates Helen from the police chief, and, on a metatextual level, to the cultural valuation of longer narratives over shorter ones, the narrator states, “The long and short of it is, pardon my pun, nobody likes to be laughed at” (49).

211 See Mark 6:15-29, Matthew 14:1-12, Luke 3:19-20. The biblical accounts of Salome depict her as a young girl who, after dancing for her stepfather Herod Antipas at his banquet, was granted one request from him. Salome’s mother, Herodias, prompts Salome to request the head of Saint John the Baptist in order to enact revenge upon him for his condemning as incestuous her second marriage to the brother of her first husband. Salome, obliging her mother, puts this request before her father, and Saint John is soon beheaded and his head brought to Salome upon a dish.
Traditionally, definitions of violence extend from the motivations and behaviors of the violent agent; however, this conception of violence excludes the often manifold effects of violence on the victim and ultimately privileges the victimizer over the targeted individual who has been most intimately exposed to the consequences of brutality. In acknowledging the need to consider both the victimizer as well as the victim when defining violence, Atwood emphasizes how violence has both causes and profound effects, and insists that violent women “pose the question of responsibility, because … actions produce consequences” (“Spotty-Handed” 168-9). Also see Hanmer and Saunders (30).

Atwood is here borrowing from modernist poet Archibald MacLeish’s famous statement about poetry in order to emphasize the necessity for literature to represent women as subjects, rather than objects.

While Atwood elsewhere highlights the need to lay blame and to hold others accountable for their actions, in “Salome Was a Dancer” she accedes that this ideal is not always possible, and that this fact can be as unsettling as the harms themselves.

For example, the swearing in of witnesses, and the reliance on confessions, various forms of evidence, and expert testimony. Also see Banks (86, 88).

For a further discussion of the relationship between justice and truth, see Hans Crombag’s “Adversarial or Inquisitorial” (23-4), Philip Smith and Kristin Natalier’s Understanding Criminal Justice (32) and Kevin Glynn’s discussion of “Cops, Courts, and Criminal Justice” in Tabloid Culture (57).

The narrator’s reference to the teacher as appearing similar to Jesus further suggests her attempts to canonize the teacher by linking him to his biblical counterpart, Saint John the Baptist, who, in the biblical account of the Salome, was Jesus’s cousin and thus might have held a familial resemblance to Him.

Despite the extensive emendations to Classical and Biblical myths that Atwood’s narratives offer, her mini-fictions retain their status as myth, and even epitomize Atwood’s understanding of myth as connected to deeply unsettling processes of revision. Unlike Northrop Frye, who regards myth as the most “conventionalized of all literary modes” (Anatomy 134), Atwood conceives of myth as a starting point for the re-configuration of archetypal figures and plots and, in the words of Klaus Peter Müller, “supports only those myths that claim no absolutes” (248).

In discussing Atwood’s early poetry, Grace similarly finds that “passive acquiescence does not absolve guilt or remove responsibility” (Violent 3) and Atwood herself, in a more recent publication, confirms her belief that failing to act as “your brother’s keeper” can result in “blood on your hands and a mark on your forehead” (Negotiating 102). Also see Atwood’s interview with Graeme Gibson (15).

In Ovid’s version of the myth, Procne, upon learning of Tereus’s torture and incarceration of her sister Philomel, decides to kill her son Itys that she conceived through Tereus and to secretly serve her butchered son to Tereus for dinner. In order to reveal to Tereus the contents of his meal, Philomel brings the severed head of Itys out to Tereus on a platter.
Wylie similarly finds that “Ethical criticism … presumes reading not as a matter of passive consumption but as an intersubjective transaction” (830) between the text and the reader.

More broadly, such transpositions instantiate what Atwood views as the “redeeming social value” of reading and writing literature, given its capacity to “force [us] to imagine what it’s like to be someone else” (“Writing the Male” 430).

For example, “Nightingale” offers Atwood’s own adaptation of earlier Greek re-writings of the myth in which the experiences of Philomel and Procne are similarly inverted. This earlier revision appears in Eustathius of Thessalonica’s Greek version of the myth, contained in his collected commentaries on Homer’s *Odyssey*. Regrettably, Eustathius’s commentaries on Homer’s epic poem are not yet translated into English.
Chapter 5

“exploring the shadow side”

In demonstrating how violent women can “act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face,” Margaret Atwood highlights how traditionally marginal and nonliterary figures can perform central and necessary roles by exploring the many “forbidden room[s]” (“Spotty-Handed” 168, 171) that lie beyond the convincing veneers of social life. Emerging from this broad observation, this study has offered detailed readings of five novels and six works of shorter fiction, each of which demonstrates the importance of female violence in Atwood’s fiction, and the need to re-evaluate the perfunctory and peripheral role harmful women have played in previous criticism. Each chapter was motivated by a desire to create a substantive critical context and vocabulary to discuss female brutality and to expand upon the fundamental axioms that underlie this project. The first of these contends that Atwood situates violence as a deeply human behavior by erasing the aberrancy associated with harm and by articulating the logic of motivations behind brutality. To this end, Atwood insists on the connection between violence and the human condition, where “Anything is the sort of thing anyone would do, given the right circumstances” (Lady Oracle 179), and creates the conditions for reflexivity in which readers are forced to recognize their implication in violence. The second principle maintains that Atwood gainfully employs the violent woman as a means of social revision and a progressive figure that explores how conventional socio-cultural discourses, including feminism, national identity, the en-gendering of the artist, and justice ethics, can be re-imagined in productive ways. To the extent that the politics
behind Atwood’s writing are those of emendation, and art, for Atwood, “has a habit of exploring the shadow side, the unspoken, the unthought” (“If You Can’t” 21), her representations of harmful women expose the inadequacy of traditional social discourses and how the order they promise is a qualified one at best. More precisely, Atwood’s revisionism can be understood as a product of both stabilizing and destabilizing impulses, given that it defends the utility of broader socio-cultural ideologies, yet renders unstable the specific ways in which such ideologies have been articulated. At stake in such revisions is the freedom to imagine and live within one’s conditions alternately, and to discern the value of re-negotiating discourses that are a priori assumed non-negotiable.

The theoretical framing for this study extends from the dispersed critical attempts to expand the conceptual horizon of women’s brutality, and thus dually situates violence as a variable gesture and a complex social construct. Elaborating on the former, I have sought to contextualize women’s violence as a variety of behaviors that expose the biases of visuality in determining violence and Atwood’s understanding that “Fists have many forms” (Power Politics 31). Examining women’s capacity to inflict psychological, physical, indirect, and self-directed violence forcibly unsettles conventional understandings of harm and draws on the deeply-rooted connotations of the term violence to express the gravity and destructiveness of non-physical and self-inflicted attacks. Such efforts to broaden traditional understandings aim to account for the diverse ways in which women express their agency and interpret vulnerability, and thus, to reconsider and extend women’s accountability. Further examining violence as a social concept marked by ambivalence, this study argues for what René Girard terms the dual or “two-in-one nature … of violence” (37). In Atwood’s fiction, this duplicity is evident in the
simultaneously generative and destructive potential of violence and in the positioning of
the violent woman as a figure who complicates the relationship between the margins and
the center. Notwithstanding her outsider status, the violent woman consistently addresses
discourses central to her community and is situated in the fore of social, cultural, and
political change, thereby indicating that while individuals may be created and conditioned
by discursive practices, they are further able to challenge and rewrite these traditions.

Foremost amongst the discursive formations unsettled by the violent woman are
feminist frameworks, which have hitherto neglected to create a conceptual space for what
Atwood broadly characterizes as “Female bad behavior” (“Spotty-Handed” 157). Within
feminist paradigms that espouse women’s sororial connections and assume women’s
victimhood and anti-violence stance, the violent women appears a non sequitur, leaving
Atwood to question how one might “depict the scurvy behaviour often practised by
women against one another,” or “the Seven Deadly Sins in their female versions …
without being considered antifeminist” (“Spotty-Handed” 166). This study does not
intend to attack feminist platforms, or void the significant advances feminist critics have
made in recalibrating certain behaviors, such as political protest and the decision to not
wed and/or bear children, that were previously condemned in women or deemed to be of
poor taste. Rather, it aims to expose the further challenge posed by the violent woman
within discursive spaces that privilege certain female behaviors over others, and to
highlight the need for feminist discussions to sympathize with and address the full range
of women’s conduct. In other words, feminist conversations would stand to benefit from
permitting women their imperfections as a mark of their humanity, and a sign of their
freedom to falter.
Localizing the disruptive potential of the violent woman within the mythological spaces of the nation, the critical discussion of *Surfacing* and selected short stories from Atwood’s earlier collections demonstrates how female brutality is further employed to expose the half-truths perpetuated by traditional constructions of national identity. Highlighting the biases that underlie Canadians’ self-conception, the violent woman reveals the disreputable cultural practices and lamentable realities that are obscured by laudatory national metanarratives, and thus the danger of perpetuating national identity as an unexamined condition. This exposure of the Canadian character as a “hypothetical generalization” (Atwood “Eleven Years” 93), and a way of thinking that consistently overlooks certain ways of acting, insists on the need to keep open to re-evaluation the ways in which Canadians imagine themselves, and prompts Canadians to confront, and take responsibility for, the full range of their national identity. As a harbinger proclaiming the importance of such admissions, the violent woman unsettles and complicates the dominant national imaginary to reveal the misleading limitations Canadians have placed upon their understanding of themselves and of others.

Shifting focus to the female artist and the Red Shoes Syndrome that Atwood at times feared had become for creative women “almost de rigueur” (“Ground Works” 259), it becomes apparent that the violent woman similarly appears in Atwood’s artist fictions as a disruptive figure. In *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Blind Assassin*, the harmful woman emerges as a re-visionary who overcomes her impulses towards self-harm and thus re-evaluates the deadly trajectory promised to creative women. Adopting strategies of transference as a way of side-stepping the potentially noxious tensions between her female and artist roles, Atwood’s artists defy the societal biases against female creativity.
that aim to enjoin women’s engagement with their world. Such attempts at survival in one regard demonstrate the violent woman’s will to power and her recognition of the pliability of social narratives, yet in another indicate her growing awareness that projective defenses are not a solution to the problems of the female artist, but a means of prolonging their difficulties, and of compounding them with the haunting of projected or forgotten others. As such, the variable limitations such women encounter in using projective mechanisms, and their continued difficulties in pursuing their artistry, indicate how women’s creativity is often endured despite the conditions and threats to the self that move against it.

Finally, framing the violent woman as a figure unsettling to social narratives accounts for the disruption she poses within justice ethics. Both The Penelopiad and the myth-based narratives of The Tent re-draft mythic plots in order to highlight the various brutalities committed by legendary women, which range from petty harms to atrocious acts of infanticide, and the alternative moral frames called upon to redress and discuss such harms. Drawing on the pre-existent ethical quality of myths, Atwood’s revised narratives refuse the reduction of social complexity to moral simplicity and range beyond traditional justice paradigms by exploring the alternate possibilities of narrative “sentencing” and care ethics responses. Through such efforts, Atwood’s belief that morality must remain conversant with all types of interpersonal interaction becomes apparent alongside her sense that ethics is best conceptualized as an ongoing and adaptive process. Moreover, the inadequacy of both traditional and alternative moral positions as final solutions in Atwood’s myths suggests that this understanding of ethical engagement
as a continuing practice is necessary to encourage the critical and reflexive use of, rather than obedience to, moral frameworks.

An exhaustive study of Atwood’s representation and rhetorical use of the violent woman is beyond the aims of the present study to analyze the specific employment of such women in revising social and cultural discourses. Nonetheless, brief mention might be made of the more prominent examples of female violence within Atwood’s other writing, and the meanings such women create within their individual texts. In *Alias Grace* (1996), for example, Atwood looks back to nineteenth-century Canada to the historical figure of Grace Marks, who is suspected of killing, or abetting the murder of, her employer Thomas Kinnear and his mistress Nancy Montgomery. Yet Grace’s non-disclosure concerning her relative guilt or innocence does not necessarily imply her attempt to evade the truth, but rather, her early inability to discern it. Caught between the Charybdis of others’ attempts to define her as a figure of otherness and the Scylla of not knowing how to define herself, Grace draws attention to the uneasiness aroused by dangerous women and indicates the potential for such women to become unfamiliar to themselves. However, through her quilting Grace increasingly gains self-knowledge, recognizing how good and evil co-exist within her, and “are located closer together than most people think” (536). *The Robber Bride* (1993) similarly explores social constructions of female otherness, and its range of meaning from the “other woman,” or mistress, to the discomforting figure of the uncanny, the latter indicating Atwood’s interest in the porousness of constructed boundaries that requires individuals to acknowledge their similarity to, rather than distance from, the violent female figure. Subversively employing conventions of the Gothic Romance, *The Robber Bride* refuses
to sustain focus on an unassailable male hero, opting instead to center on the villainous Zenia, who, prior to her untimely death, violently disrupts the lives of her three female friends for three decades only to return from the dead in order to continue her torments. Significantly, Zenia first appears as a mirror reflection the three women notice as they dine at the Toxique restaurant, an event which signals their likeness to Zenia and which foreshadows the various ways Zenia performs as an unsettling psychic double that exposes the violent potentialities of her female friends. Not unlike the rattlesnake in the novel’s epigraph that educates its victim through its attack, Zenia allows the three women to recognize the dormant potential for violence held within each one of them, a realization which, in many ways, is far less dangerous than their denial of such a fact.

Ranging more broadly to discern the dangers of fundamentalist politics, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is a futuristic narrative in which a young Handmaid, whose original name has been displaced by the patronym “Offred,” struggles to survive within the patriarchal dystopia of Gilead. Pressured by the ruling elite to punish others’ unsanctioned acts of violence, Offred and the other Handmaids are compelled to partake in physical violence that only superficially suggests their agency, reflecting instances of contained subversion and ironic freedom scattered throughout the novel. Despite the assurances of safety offered to all women during Gilead’s rise to power, the instatement of the new ruling class demonstrates how women have not escaped violence, but become further victimized by it in being exploited as political pawns, enacting harms against others in order to achieve the goals and perpetuate the beliefs of the new totalitarian state. Conversely examining the female violence that occurs not on account of an excess of political and ethical structure, but due to a lack of it, *Moral Disorder* (2006) highlights
women’s self-harm outside the rubric of the Red Shoes Syndrome, and the deleterious
effect societal confusion has on the individual. As one who is particularly
“impressionable” (39) and who deeply internalizes her world, Lizzie sees beyond the
edifices of order that are tentatively offered amidst the political unrest and radical cultural
change of late 1960s and early 1970s Canada to discern her lack of security and
belonging. As such, her attempted suicide appears as an ominous sign of her nation’s
treading dangerously close to self-destructiveness, and an apocalyptic upheaval that is
writ small on the bodies of its citizens.

This representation of Lizzie’s self-injurious behavior as a distillation of broader
social trends reflects the processes of condensation that appear more dramatically and
consistently in Atwood’s poetry. In *Power Politics* (1971), for example, women’s
impulses and enactments of physical violence towards men (and vice-versa) frequently
appear as individual instances of more expansive social patterns and the inequities of
power that similarly incite political rivalry and internecine wars. Despite the
epigrammatic form characterizing much of the collection that, according to Atwood,
permits its appearing “more ‘intimate’” (“A Question” 42) than her other writings, *Power
Politics* simultaneously suggests that the speaker’s and her lover’s “bodies / are populated
with billions” (9) and are “becom[ing] slowly more public” (30). Individual poems, such
as “They are hostile nations,” “Their attitudes differ” and “My beautiful wooden leader,”
insist on this reading of domestic violence within larger frames to reveal how the failures
of sympathy, understanding, and forgiveness occur in both interpersonal and international
relations, resulting in grave consequences. To a lesser extent, this highlighting of
women’s violence to expose the interface between private and public power struggles
Similarly appears in *The Circle Game* (1966). “On the Streets, Love” and “Playing Cards” offer the bellicose woman as a distinctly public image, permitting the battle of the sexes to become a microcosmic representation of “all the other games” (32) and of more widespread struggles. In particular, the desire of the female speaker in “The Circle Game” to escape the entrapment of her male lover and the history of colonial domination, to “break / … bones, [his] prisoning rhythms” and “all the glass cases” (55) holding “weapons / that were once outside / sharpening themselves on war” (51), demonstrates how freedom, for both the individual woman and the nation, is often achieved at the high cost of human destruction.

Atwood’s later publication of *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) further extends her consideration of female brutality, yet here, representations of women’s potential for violence comment more extensively on women’s duplicitous nature than in previous works. As the first book of poems to be published by Atwood after the birth of her daughter, *Two-Headed Poems* explores the disparate capacities of women, where “Five Poems for Dolls,” “A Paper Bag,” “The Woman Makes Peace With Her Faulty Heart,” and “A Red Shirt” indicate how “female” must be re-conceptualized to acknowledge how women partake in behaviors that undermine the traditional belief that they “should be / a veil, a white shadow, bloodless / … not / dangerous” (102). However, notwithstanding the focus on the individual offered in such poems, the collection more broadly contextualizes women’s duality as similar to Canada’s, given the tensions between the nation’s English and French factions that are brought to light most explicitly in “Two-Headed Poems” and “The Right Hand Fights the Left.” As such, depictions of women’s brutality in *Two-Headed Poems*, as in *Power Politics* and *The Circle Game*, remain
connected to broader social issues, indicating how such renderings are consistent with the political focus and anti-lyricism widely noted by critics as characteristic of Atwood’s poetry.

In *True Stories* (1981), Atwood shifts her focus to female victimization by exploring women’s capacity to turn their violence back upon themselves. Like *Moral Disorder*, *True Stories* frequently investigates women’s self-harm outside the context of the Red Shoes Syndrome, suggesting that the reasons for women’s self-destructiveness range far beyond the struggles of the female artist. Moreover, while women in “True Romances,” “Bluejays” and “Small Poems for the Winter Solstice” view self-inflicted violence as a means justified by its ends, enabling them to prove (to themselves or others) their humanity, their desire to live, and/or their freedom, others, such as the woman in “Christmas Carols” who “threw herself from a rooftop, thirty / times raped & pregnant by the enemy / who did this to her” (56), regard their self-harm as a paradoxical gesture of violence committed not by themselves, but by another. Connecting with other instances of female victimization famously depicted in “A Women’s Issue,” “Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written,” and “Spelling,” and perhaps less recognizably in “Hotel,” “The Arrest of the Stockbroker,” and “Torture,” such bleak descriptions of female vulnerability extend the focus of this study by indicating how women are often targeted as victims in acts of individual and institutionalized brutality. However, Atwood’s insistence on women’s potential to alter power dynamics and do great harm indicates that an exclusive focus on women as recipients of harm can be misleading, offering an incomplete understanding of the complex relationship between women and violence.
While women’s attacks against other women are, surprisingly, almost entirely absent from Atwood’s poetry, their destruction of nature is widely manifest, suggesting how certain themes are explored more thoroughly in Atwood’s fiction, while others are given greater focus in her verse. Atwood’s developing understanding of the vulnerability of animals and nature is apparent in her early use of such non-human entities as figurations to depict human vulnerability to women’s attacks. This is perhaps best seen in *The Animals in That Country* (1968), where poems such as “A Pursuit” depict a female speaker “hunt[ing]” her lover “Through the wilderness of the flesh / across the mind’s ice” (66). Such representations contrast with her later renderings in the “Snake Poems” of *Interlunar* (1984), where the violence done to animals is given its own consideration and recognized as harm enacted against sentient life, rather than a vehicle for understanding the harms humans enact against each other, reflecting the maturation of Atwood’s “pantheist” (“Articulating” 115) beliefs. More recently in *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) and *The Door* (2007), Atwood insists that such brutality against non-human and human others indicates women’s participation in the violence that in part characterizes the natural world, drawing connections between women and the female fox in “Red Fox,” who displays a “white knife of a smile” (17), and the cat in “Mourning for Cats,” who is “vital and on the prowl, / and brutal towards other forms of life” (11). While Atwood distinguishes between the harms enacted by humans and that which is demonstrated by non-human figures by addressing the morality and accountability implicated in the former, her representations of the behaviors shared between humans and other species suggest that while female violence is not condoned or excused, it is to be expected.
Atwood’s attempts to trace the history of female violence in section two of *Morning in the Burned House* through her depictions of legendary women such as the Egyptian deity Sekhmet, Helen of Troy, Cressida, and Manet’s Olympia attest that female violence is nothing new, perhaps extending as far back as the beginnings of human kind. Nonetheless, it continues to pose hermeneutic challenges that vary between artistic media. Atwood’s insistence that she “do[es]n’t write books of poetry … like novels” (“Dissecting” 4), and the processes of condensation that give her poetic subjects a “doubled gravity” (“The Words”, *Interlunar* 83), intimate the need to reconfigure the frames of discussion to adequately address female brutality in Atwood’s verse. Similarly, her understanding of the poem as a fundamentally aural entity that produces “echoes” and “a texture of sound” (“My Mother” 69) points to the necessity of nuancing an examination of indirect and verbal violence in particular with the distinct qualities of Atwood’s poetic form and effect, and thus, of reserving such analyses for future studies.
Works Cited


---. “Articulating the Mute.” Interview with Karla Hammond. Ingersoll, *Margaret Atwood* 109-120.


---. “Canadian Culture.” Atwood Papers. Ms. 200.74.3. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.


---. “A Conversation with Margaret Atwood.” Interview by Living Author Series Interviewer. Mendez-Egle 172-180.


---. “Dancing on the Edge of the Precipice.” Interview with Graeme Gibson. Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood 74-85.


--- “The Empress Has No Clothes.” Interview with Elizabeth Meese. Ingersoll, *Margaret Atwood* 177-190.


--- “Evading the Pigeonholers.” Interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald and Kathryn Crabbe. Ingersoll, *Margaret Atwood* 131-139.


---. “Just Looking at Things That Are There.” Interview with Alan Twigg. Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood 121-130.


---. “Opening a Door onto a Completely Unknown Space.” Interview with Mary Morris. Ingersoll, *Waltzing* 139-152.


---. “Poetry and Audience.” Atwood Papers. Ms. 200.56.2. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.


---. “A Practical Sibyl: Margaret Atwood is Eerily Adept at Predicting the Future.”


<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=912129001&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1207849025&clientId=14119>.


---. “A Stack of Plates.” Atwood Papers. Ms. 335.119.10. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.


---. “To Write Is to Wrestle with and Angel in the Mud.” Interview with Rudolf Bader. Ingersoll, *Waltzing* 186-199.


---. “Uglypuss [Drafts].” Atwood Papers. Ms. 200.70.9. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
---. “Uncollected Prose [A].” Atwood Papers. Ms. 200.90.2. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

---. “Uncollected Prose [B].” Atwood Papers. Ms. 200.56.29. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.


---. “Using Other People’s Dreadful Childhoods.” Ingersoll, *Margaret Atwood* 221-233.


---. “Stranger within the Gates: Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness Tips.*” Wilson 74-87.


---. “The Where of Here: Margaret Atwood and a Canadian Tradition.” Davidson and Davidson 15-34.


Emberley, Peter, ed. *By Loving Our Own: George Grant and the Legacy of Lament for a Nation*. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 1990.


Fiamengo, Janice. “‘It looked at me with its mashed eye’: Animal and Human Suffering in *Surfacing.*” Moss and Kozakewich 171-184.


Foley, Helene P. “Penelope as Moral Agent.” Cohen 93-115.


Grace, Sherrill E. “Articulating the ‘Space Between’: Atwood’s Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings.” *Grace and Weir* 1-16.


---. “In Search of Demeter: The Lost, Silent Mother in *Surfacing.*” Van Spanckeren and Garden Castro 35-47.


Hatch, Ronald. “Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology.” Nischik 180-201.


---. “‘It All Depends on Where You Stand in Relation to the Forest’: Atwood and the Wilderness from *Surfacing* to *Wilderness Tips*.” York 47-70.


---. “Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood’s Novels.” Nischik 139-156.

---. “Writing History, from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* to *The Blind Assassin*.” Moss and Kozakewich 107-120.


Irvine, Lorna. “One Woman Leads to Another.” Davidson and Davidson 95-106.
---. “Recycling Culture: Kitsch, Camp, and Trash in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction.”

Nischik 202-214.


Kirtz, Mary. “(Dis)unified Field Theories: The Clarendon Lectures Seen through (a) *Cat’s Eye.*” *Wilson* 54-73.


Mycak, Sonia. *In Search of the Split Subject: Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology, and the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Toronto: ECW, 1996.


Neuman, Shirley. “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale.*” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.3 (2006): 857-868.


---. “Margaret Atwood’s Short Stories and Shorter Fictions.” Howells 145-160.

---. “Murder in the Dark: Margaret Atwood’s Inverse Poetics of Intertextual Minuteness.” Wilson 1-17.


O’Keeffe, Terence. “Suicide and Self-Starvation.” Donnelly 136-149.


---. “Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle: Writing Against Notions of Unity.” *Nicholson* 133-152.


Sturgess, Charlotte. “Margaret Atwood’s Short Fiction.” Nischik 87-96.


Sugars, Cynthia. “‘Saying Boo to Colonialism’: Surfacing, Tom Thomson, and the National Ghost.” Moss and Kozakewich 137-158.


---. “Rewriting the Odyssey in the Twenty-First Century: Mary Zimmerman’s Odyssey and Margaret Atwood’s Penelopiad.” College Literature 34:2 (2007): 263-278.

LION. 10 May 2008


Thompson, Lee Briscoe. “Minuets and Madness: Margaret Atwood’s Dancing Girls.” Davidson and Davidson 107-122.


264


<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=192982631&SrchMode=1&sid=8&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1211407244&clientId=14119>.


ProQuest. 2 March 2008

<http://proquest-.umi-.com/pqdlinc?-did=855272071-&Fmt=7-&clientId=14119-&RQT=309-&VName=PQD>.


Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Glasgow: Collins’ Sons, 1976.


Wilson, Sharon Rose. “Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood’s Major Novels.” *Howells* 176-190.


---. “Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood’s Works.” *Nischik* 215-228.


---. “Metamorphosis and Survival: Notes on the Recent Poetry of Margaret Atwood.” Grace and Weir 125-142.


