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Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol14/iss1/15
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Abstract
Popular discourses are ubiquitous in the writing of Margaret Atwood. Her novels, poetry and critical writing constantly foreground ways in which notions of gender identity, and of cultural identity more generally, have been shaped by media and other popular representations. References to Hollywood and television rub shoulders with allusions to magazines, fairy tale, popular song and a host of other forms responsible for women's socialization and female mythologies: these include the Persephone2 and Triple Goddess3 myths, popular religious discourse, advertising language and iconography and the stereotypical norms inculcated in girls by such institutions as Brownies and Home Economics classes.4
Popular discourses are ubiquitous in the writing of Margaret Atwood. Her novels, poetry and critical writing constantly foreground ways in which notions of gender identity, and of cultural identity more generally, have been shaped by media and other popular representations. References to Hollywood and television rub shoulders with allusions to magazines, fairy tale, popular song and a host of other forms responsible for women's socialization and female mythologies: these include the Persephone\(^2\) and Triple Goddess\(^3\) myths, popular religious discourse, advertising language and iconography and the stereotypical norms inculcated in girls by such institutions as Brownies and Home Economics classes.\(^4\)

In her fiction Atwood's all-pervasive references to popular culture suggest the constrictions placed on self-expression (particularly but not exclusively where women are concerned). The narrator/protagonist in *Surfacing* (1972) is a commercial artist obliged to produce what she considers to be false representations of local culture for a volume of *Quebec Folk Tales* and this work is contrasted with the region's Native rock-paintings which, unlike her illustrations, are presented as organic. In *The Edible Woman* (1969) Atwood describes the predicament of a heroine who gives up food when she sees herself as being metaphorically eaten up by the pressure to conform to the consumer society's norms of femininity, and a not dissimilar pattern of temporary withdrawal from eating is explored in the latter stages of *Surfacing*. In *Lady Oracle* (1976) this pattern is inverted in the heroine Joan Foster's account of her early life, with a quasi-bulimic syndrome replacing a quasi-anorexic one as Joan rebels against societal norms of female thinness. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) Atwood's presentation of her futuristic dystopia of Gilead offers a picture of thought-control mechanisms which, as is the case with much science-
fiction fantasy, can be read as an allegorical extension of present-day actualities, with particular reference to popular patriarchal religious discourse. In each of these novels the woman protagonist rebels and achieves at least a limited form of autonomy and self-definition, though none of the texts is glibly optimistic about changing the status quo. At the same time the novels themselves upend received versions of literary and popular cultural forms – such as the Gothic Romance, the comic Novel of Manners, the detective-story and the science-fiction fantasy. In this discussion, in addition to illustrating the range of Atwood’s references to popular cultural forms in Lady Oracle and the ways in which they shape identity, I hope to show how the reworking of the first of these modes (Gothic Romance) and to some extent the second (the comic Novel of Manners), while initially seeming to demonstrate how popular discourses stereotype and restrict, ultimately does the opposite. Stereotypical conceptions of both culture and gender are transformed by her parodic use of form; popular genres are employed in a manner that has the effect of carnivalesque subversion.

Names confer identities and Joan Foster finds her identity determined by a popular cultural discourse from the outset – she is named after the Hollywood film star Joan Crawford. The only problem with this is that ‘Joan Crawford’ proves, like virtually every other signifier in Lady Oracle to be ambivalent:

... my mother named me after Joan Crawford. This is one of the things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men – or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. (p. 38)

Joan also considers the possibility that her mother may have given her this name to prevent her having a name of her own, but comes to realize that Joan Crawford ‘didn’t have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille Le Sueur which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat’ (p. 38). So very early on in life Joan becomes aware that roles – particularly women’s roles – are conferred not innate and that identity can be ambivalent and multiple. This realization prefigures much of the subsequent action of the text, in which she lives out a schizophrenic existence occupying a variety of available female roles.

Hollywood is a major formative influence on the young Joan. Her Aunt Lou takes her to see a variety of movies from the late ’forties and early ’fifties in which the dominant theme seems to be a woman’s stoical or heroic struggle against adverse odds: Joan watches June Allyson enduring her husband’s death in The Glenn Miller Story; Judy Garland trying to cope with an alcoholic James Mason in A Star is Born; and Eleanor Parker play-
ing a crippled opera singer in *Interrupted Melody* (p. 79). Her favourite among films on this theme is, however, a British production, *The Red Shoes* (p. 79). Watching this, she projects herself into Moira Shearer's rendition of the part of a suffering ballet dancer. Ballet and opera both come to function as popular rather than 'high art' discourses in the text, since they are frequently filtered through the medium of cinema and since Joan, like Alice Munro's Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, sees them as offering an opportunity for grand passion and a romantic transformation of humdrum existence. This emerges most obviously in her Cinderella or Ugly Duckling-like self-projection, while a very fat eight-year-old, into the title-role of the Walt Disney film *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met* (p. 5), and also in a reference to another Disney vision of transcendent fatness, *Dumbo the Flying Elephant* (p. 216). So two mythologies, those of stoical or heroic struggle against suffering and romantic transformation, characterize the films that affect Joan, but the former is initially more important in shaping her psyche and when she buys a dime-store goldfish she names it 'Susan Hayward', because she has just seen *With a Song in My Heart*, in which Susan Hayward 'made a comeback from a wheelchair' (p. 78). Her mother, who has resisted the idea of her having a pet, prophesies that the goldfish will die and she wants to give it a fighting chance, but it dies anyway, seemingly because Joan (engaging in self-projection once again?) overfeeds it.

The popularity of the Hollywood musical leads her mother to send Joan to dancing classes and here she learns some home truths about conventional responses to the female figure when, while all her peers are cast as butterflies, she is forced because of her fatness to play the part of a mothball in a dance entitled the Butterfly Frolic at the dancing school's annual spring recital. Images of flight, suggestive of some kind of transcendence of everyday reality, permeate the novel and here the effect is a kind of reversal of the 'magic transformations' which Joan craves from an early age. She comes to understand that popular conventions of representing women reflect social attitudes:

>If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines are always good-looking? The effect would be quite different if they were overweight. The men would find it hilarious instead of immoral or sexually titillating. However, plump unattractive women are just as likely to be tortured as thin ones. More so, in fact. (p. 48)

This latter observation is borne out when she is tied up and blindfolded in a Toronto ravine by the girls with whom she walks to Brownies, only to be rescued by a mysterious man carrying a bunch of daffodils, who may or may not be the same man who exposed himself to the girls the week before. Her mother has instilled a Manichean view of men into Joan
she tells her there are only 'good' men and 'bad' men – and so she is left puzzled by this apparent cross-over figure who appears to be morally double.

Atwood’s critical book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) offers an interesting framework for considering such a passage, and for looking at gender relations in *Lady Oracle* more generally. Atwood gives an account of what she calls ‘the Rapunzel Syndrome’:

... the Rapunzel Syndrome ... seems to be a pattern – not just a Canadian pattern – for ‘realistic’ novels about ‘normal’ women. In the Rapunzel Syndrome there are four elements: Rapunzel, the main character; the wicked witch who has imprisoned her, usually her mother or her husband, sometimes her father or grandfather; the tower she's imprisoned in – the attitudes of society, symbolized usually by her house and children which society says she must not abandon; and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. In the original Rapunzel story the Rescuer is a solution and the wicked witch is vanquished; in the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help.... The Rescuer’s facelessness and lack of substance as a character is usually a clue to his status as a fantasy-escape figure; Rapunzel is in fact stuck in the tower, and the best thing she can do is learn how to cope with it.

Joan’s rescuer from the ravine is insubstantial to a point where even his identity is unclear – is he the daffodil man or not? – and his dual identity proves to be a pattern which is replicated in her adult life. Every man with whom she becomes involved – the Polish Count Paul (named after St. Paul, p. 151), her husband Arthur (whose name can possibly be seen as containing an ironic romantic reference to the mythical British king) and the counter-culture artist the Royal Porcupine (whose name is pure self-invention, an amalgam of an animal which he offers an alternative Canadian national symbol in place of the beaver and an idiosyncratic royalism) – each of these appears first to be a Rescuer, but subsequently takes over the role of witch or jailer that her mother has played in her girlhood. Eventually Joan comes to the realization that all the men in her life have split identities: her father has killed people in the war, but has subsequently been regarded as a life-saver in his job as an anaesthetist; Paul has also been ‘Mavis Quilp’, the writer of escapist Nurse Novels, another popular form; the Royal Porcupine surrenders his exotic Byronic identity and reveals himself as ordinary Chuck Brewer who wants to be Joan’s husband not a ‘fantasy-escape figure’ for her, which leaves her asking despairingly ‘Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?’ (pp. 271-2). So the daffodil man is a paradigm for all the men that follow, and Rapunzel will remain firmly ‘stuck in the tower’ as long as she awaits a knight on a white charger to rescue her. Joan remains in this situation for most of the novel because she has internalized the values of the Rapunzel Syndrome from the various popular discourses that shape her upbringing.
Several of these have to do with escapism. Her outings to the movies with Aunt Lou give way to Sunday evening visits to the Jordan Chapel, a Spiritualist meeting-place which very obviously offers an escapist discourse equivalent to that of the dream factory. There she encounters a typically Canadian response to the romantic side of Victorian culture when the 'visiting' medium Mr. Stewart quotes Arthur Hugh Clough's 'Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth' (p. 106) – elsewhere 'The Lady of Shalott' occupies a similar function, while Joan is described by a journalist as 'looking like a lush Rossetti portrait' (p. 9) when she becomes a successful Gothic authoress. Escapism is also central to a number of other popular discourses that appear in the text: the fototoranzzi that she and Arthur read while in Italy, Paul's Nurse novels, women's magazines, some of the sideshows she works among when employed at the Canadian National Exhibition, the décor of the Royal York hotel in Toronto, described as 'a bogus fairy-land of nineteenth-century delights' (p. 135), and the satirical vignette with which it is linked, the lid of the Laura Secord chocolate box. Most important of all in this context, however, is Joan's own writing, the Costume Gothics that she comes to write under the influence of Paul and the inner 'Lady Oracle' poetry that she comes to write after an experiment with Automatic Writing techniques first suggested to her at the Jordan Chapel.

Her Costume Gothics are typical of most of the escapist discourses with which she becomes involved. They offer wish-fulfilment fantasies and hence occupy a similar role in ordinary (and not so ordinary?) women’s lives to that played by the Rescuer figure in the Rapunzel Syndrome and, as Paul tells her when he first introduces her to them, they represent 'an escape for the writer as well as the reader' (p. 155). So, initially at least, Joan’s writing them seems to involve a form of self-evasion. Produced for 'Columbine Books' (p. 156), a playful fictionalization of the name of Harlequin Books (the North American equivalent of Britain’s Mills and Boon), they are formula-fiction written in the romantic novelette genre that derives from the novel of sentimental courtship that had its origins in Richardson's Pamela. Examination of the intertextual elements in a passage like Joan’s breathless account of the plot of the latter stages of her 'Gothic' Escape from Love helps to illustrate the formulaic elements that go into the making of her writing in this genre:

Samantha Deane was kidnapped precipitously from her bedroom in the house of the kindly guppy man; threatened with rape at the hands of the notorious Earl of Darcy, the hero’s disreputable uncle; rescued by the hero; snatched again by the agents of the lush-bodied evil-minded Countess of Piedmont, the jealous semi-Italian beauty who had once been the hero’s mistress. Poor Samantha flew back and forth across London like a beanbag, ending up finally in the hero’s arms, while his wife, the feeble-minded Lady Letitia, died of yellow fever, the Countess, now quite demented, plunged to her death off a battlement during a thunderstorm and the Earl was financially ruined by the Pacific Bubble. (p. 176)
The basic damsel-in-distress situation derives from the Gothic novel's use of the persecuted heroine as a pivotal point and, earlier still, from Richardson, whose Pamela and Clarissa are both 'threatened with rape'; the name of the villain of the piece is, of course, taken from Pride and Prejudice, though the complexity of the character's eponym in Jane Austen's novel is not admitted into the Gothic's sub-literary reworking, where stereotypes proliferate; the 'feeble-minded' first wife of the hero, who stands as an impediment in the way of his union with the heroine, and the foreign Countess who jumps off the battlements at the end both appear to have their origins in the character of Bertha, the 'mad' first wife in Jane Eyre. When the novel comes out its jacket depicts Samantha with 'her hair rippling like seaweed against an enormous cloud; Castle DeVere turreted with menace in the background' (p. 176): the architecture of the Gothic house, another staple of the form from Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto onwards, is redolent of Charlotte Brontë's Thornfield Hall and Daphne Du Maurier's Manderley, and, again typically, is invested with gender attributes.

The conventions of the Costume Gothic may seem to offer illusory hopes of deliverance for modern-day Rapunzels, obscuring the reality of their being 'stuck in the tower'. Yet the Gothic has, at the same time, always been a form that has offered the possibility of an alternative feminist discourse. Both in its concentration on the figure of the marginalized outsider – for example the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein – and, more importantly, in its employment of fantasy, it has tended to offer resistance to the norms of patriarchal society and of social-realist discourse. And Gothic functions, along with the various other escapist forms already outlined, in just this way in Lady Oracle. Writing Gothics affords Joan the opportunity of a secret life away from her husband Arthur, who is presented as a product of the repressive, Calvinist aspects of Maritime culture. Writing an ironic reworking of the Gothic mode ultimately provides Atwood, as in Surfacing, with a means of subverting received gender stereotypes. So the Gothic can offer a form of imaginative release even when actual escape is not possible, though Joan, who likens herself to Houdini in the closing pages of the novel (p. 335), comes to be an untypical Rapunzel in that she repeatedly effects actual physical escapes. But obviously escapist fantasy has a negative side too, since it encourages unattainable fantasies.

In Lady Oracle the ambiguity surrounding Gothic – as a negative purveyor of unattainable fantasies and as a positive alternative to restrictive unitary identities – relates directly to the text's all-pervasive references to popular culture. Joan finds herself, as a not untypical woman it would seem, forced to live through a variety of roles: her fat-girl persona is supplanted by a thin-girl identity when she diets to gain the legacy left her in her Aunt Lou's will if she loses a hundred pounds and she subsequently finds herself concealing her former obesity from Arthur and
others; her Costume Gothics are also kept secret from Arthur and written under the pseudonym of her Aunt Lou’s name; most strikingly of all she eventually ‘kills’ herself by faking her drowning in Lake Ontario to escape from the complications of her life that are threatening to engulf her. Again and again she is forced to re-invent herself, to a point where fiction-making becomes as much a part of her day-to-day existence as of her writing. Just as she comes to realize that all the men in her life have had more than one identity, she is forced to recognize that she herself is multiple and this, like the Gothic transformations of her fiction, proves to be an ambiguous situation. In a negative sense it renders her schizophrenic—and one may attribute such schizophrenia to the multiple roles demanded of women in consumer society—but on the other hand such schizophrenia offers the possibility of a radical re-invention of personality, making the subject a site for positive magical transformation—and there are numerous references to such a process in the text—as opposed to the purely illusory romantic escapism more normally seen as being encouraged by romantic fiction, along with Hollywood cinema, the Jordan Chapel and all the other popular escapist discourses represented in Lady Oracle.

Years after her first visits to the Jordan Chapel, Joan meets Leda Sprott, the leader of the group of Spiritualists she encountered there, again. This occurs when Arthur refuses to be married in a church because he disapproves of religion or in city hall because he disapproves of the government and so they are forced to seek out an alternative form of marriage ceremony. When they eventually arrive at the venue of the ‘interdenominational’ (p. 189) reverend they have located through the popular medium of the Yellow Pages, this person, ‘E.P. Revele’, proves to be none other than Leda Sprott. Joan, frightened that her own hidden identity as a former fat girl will be revealed, contemplates the possible reasons for Leda Sprott’s metamorphosis: ‘I thought, men who changed their names were likely to be con-men, criminals, undercover agents or magicians, whereas women who changed their names were probably just married’ (p. 204). In fact Leda Sprott/E.P. Revele approximates much more closely to the male paradigm that Joan has constructed—she has changed her name to escape debts—and she confesses to Joan that she is something of a charlatan. She may be viewed as part con-woman, part-magician; her picaroon manipulations of people’s fantasies make her a shaman-like figure, a creator whose trickster strategies have the effect of breaking down barriers between areas of experience that normally appear discrete—most obviously that between life and ‘the Other Side’, but also through her androgynous identity (Joan thinks ‘E.P. Revele’ is going to be a man until they meet her) collapsing traditional notions of gender roles.

Incidental though this may appear to be, it proves to be of crucial importance since Joan herself, through her multiplicity of roles and her work as an unintentionally subversive woman writer comes to be a similar creative trickster, a Houdini who offers genuine possibilities of escape for
the female subject. This is most clear in the reworkings Gothic undergoes at her hands in the latter stages of the text. Under the influence of Leda Sprott/E.P. Revele who has told her she has a ‘gift’, she turns to Automatic Writing, setting up a candle in front of a mirror, reminiscent of the mirror in front of which her mother, subscribing to another popular female discourse, has performed elaborate make-up rituals while Joan was a girl. Mirrors have a prominent place in several of Atwood’s novels, and mirror-reflections are usually suggestive of the individual subject’s sense of separate identity. Here as Joan sceptically constructs a scenario for Automatic Writing, thinking it will provide a nice touch for her current Costume Gothic, she suddenly finds herself an Alice going into the Lacanian looking-glass, back from the Symbolic Order into a pre-cultural phase of existence, an experience similar to the journey back to prehistory undertaken by the narrator/protagonist in the latter stages of Surfacing, where the cultural slate seems to be wiped clean. The writing she produces during this and other subsequent Automatic Writing sessions, her ‘Lady Oracle’ poetry, is received by critics and the media as a feminist attack on the dominant pattern of gender relations in contemporary society. Joan repudiates such a view, but nevertheless recognizes that this writing is an inversion of the formulas she deploys in her Costume Goths. She refers to it as:

...a lot like one of my standard Costume Goths, but a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside-down somehow. There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of the hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love. (p. 234)

So, in this writing that emanates from her subconscious, she subverts the conventions of the Gothic form in which she has been working and produces a discourse that radically questions its gender constructions.

This anticipates a similar metamorphosis in Stalked By Love, the Costume Gothic she is writing in the Italian present of the novel, in the closing pages of Lady Oracle. Joan suddenly finds a similar involuntary force controlling this writing as she slips from using Charlotte, the typical persecuted maiden protagonist that she employs in all her Goths, as the narrative consciousness to writing from the point of view of Felicia, the lascivious first wife of the Rochester-like hero Redmond. The perceptive reader may have spotted an element of self-projection in Joan’s construction of Felicia much earlier, since both have long red hair, but now it becomes clear that she is beginning to justify a character who normally has the sole function of providing an obstacle to the marriage of the aristocratic hero and the socially inferior heroine. Joan breaks off the narrative, telling herself ‘It was all wrong’ (p. 321). However, when she subsequently returns to write the final episode of Stalked By Love that is included in the text, Felicia has firmly been instated as the protagonist.
is a reversal as total as the rewriting that the dominant patterns of *Jane Eyre* undergo in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Felicia now goes into the maze attached to the Gothic house, which the servants have been warning Charlotte about throughout the narrative. Entry into the maze promises a resolution of all the romantic complications in the 'central plot' (p. 341), and when Felicia penetrates this labyrinth she is confronted by a vision of all the former wives of Redmond, now reconstructed as more of a Bluebeard figure than a Rochester. The usual ending of the Gothic undergoes a radical metamorphosis as Felicia is welcomed into this sorority of victimized wives. Again the pattern is that of 'a Gothic gone wrong'. At the same time a number of other distinctions are broken down as the former wives are represented in terms of Joan's earlier identities and Redmond is suddenly referred to as Arthur. The thin dividing-line that has separated fact from fiction throughout the novel – Joan has repeatedly fictionalized her identity – now disappears entirely and although Felicia/Joan is left struggling with Redmond/Arthur as the final scene of the Gothic breaks off, there is a strong sense that she is able to draw positive sustenance from her multiplicity of roles and is no longer avoiding the realities of her existence through self-evasion. With the distinction between what has hitherto been regarded as fact and fiction in the novel collapsed, the extent to which *Lady Oracle* itself is reworking the conventions of Gothic Romance becomes abundantly clear and the ending of the whole novel frustrates the conventions by failing to provide the closure, or happy ending, expected in the Gothic form.

On an earlier occasion Joan has referred to the Bluebeard legend in a passage in which she typically presents herself as something of a fool: 'In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives, not the third, clever one who keeps to the essentials, presence of mind, foresight, the telling of watertight lies' (p. 152). At the end the Felicia/Joan figure looks likely to be more like the 'clever' third sister, but the use of the 'fool-heroine' pattern throughout much of the novel is another subversive strategy. Comedy is frequently seen to support the social order. In a typical Novel of Manners or dramatic romantic comedy, the final removal of the barriers that have prevented the lovers' coming together tends not only to suggest that a benevolent comic providence is presiding, but also to reinforce the social order. Ever since *The Edible Woman*, a novel which Atwood has referred to as an 'anti-comedy' because of its frustration of the pattern in which boy and girl finally come together, all her comic fiction has tended to undermine such notions of comedy. In *Lady Oracle* the persistent use of parody, the inversion of the conventions of romantic escapist discourses and the interpolation of popular modes into the literary text all make the novel a carnivalesque comedy in the Bakhtinian sense. Bakhtin argues that carnivalization of form takes place when the popular forms of the marketplace and oral culture invade the domain of literature and this is exactly...
what is happening in *Lady Oracle*. So, while initially the vast repertory of popular forms that are on display in the novel may seem to stultify women's creativity and individuality, ultimately they come to function as part of a textual strategy that subverts the very notion of fixity, as a kind of correlative to the role-playing in which Joan engages. The emphasis on multiplicity makes for a notion of the subject as fragmentary and fluid and this contains liberating potential. Rapunzel becomes a chameleon able to escape from her tower without the intercession of the Rescuer figure, since she has become a Houdini herself.

NOTES

2. See particularly *Surfacing* (1972).
4. *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1977), pp. 48-55 and p. 210 (Joan is untypical in this respect since she does not take home economics). Subsequent references to *Lady Oracle* are to this edition and are cited in the text.
5. Towards the end of the novel Joan considers the alternative possibility that she may have been named after Joan of Arc (p. 337).
8. Possibly Atwood having a certain amount of fun with herself as the author of the "Gothic" *Surfacing*.
10. See particularly, pp. 19 and 214.