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# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA RIVERSIDE

Vexing the Terrain: Narrative Form as Feminist Critique

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Michael Andrew Schwartz

June 2022

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For Janine, Bruce and Phoebe, my ordinary world.

### ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Vexing the Terrain: Narrative Form as Feminist Critique

by

#### Michael Andrew Schwartz

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English University of California, Riverside, June 2022 Dr. Kimberly Devlin, Chairperson

This dissertation is focused upon narrative variations and interventions expressive of feminist critique. Using a feminist narratological interpretive methodology, I examine literary and film narratives containing unconventional treatments of sequentiality, temporality, resolution/irresolution, focalization, diegetic levels, and genre. These treatments are inherently rhetorical and, as shown in the texts discussed, often engaged in a questioning, unsettling or complicating of narrative form. My project is intended to locate and theorize what could be called narrative feminism, legible as narrative disruptions, indeterminacies, and ambiguities that convey feminist commentary or critique.

Rejecting a common article of faith within narratology, where narrative form is presumed apolitical and dispassionate rather than a vessel for critique, I argue that feminism inheres within narrative form, contained in the very composition and sequencing of content within a narrative. In this way, I aspire to give narrative form a more distinct primacy, focusing on narrative disruptions or variations that function as socially symbolic acts, in the sense Frederic Jameson theorizes in *The Political* 

Unconscious (1981). In my readings of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, and a group of cinematic romantic comedies, I explain how each uses narrative form to question or subvert sexist ideas about women and femininity. The title of my project is taken from Volume One (*The War of the Words*) of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1989), which provides an account of women's literary engagements with gendered social tensions and violence over the last century. The authors posit that the "territory of literature [and also] the institutions of marriage and the family, of education and the professions [have become] a no man's land – a vexed terrain – in which scattered armies of men and women all too often clash by day and by night" (xiii). I see my project as both vexing the terrain, insofar as it participates in a counter-discourse of feminism's uneasy alliance with narratology, and also forging new interpretive possibilities among the texts that are part of this study.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction—Woolf's Shadow—1

Chapter 1—Emancipatory Regionalism and Narrative Rhetoricity in Kate Chopin's  $\it The Awakening$ —12

Chapter 2—Queer Temporalities and Chronotopic Gender in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—78

Chapter 3—Trickster Feminism in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*—132

Chapter 4—Feminist Interventions in Romantic Comedy—214

Conclusion—325

Works Cited—329

# **List of Figures**

Figure 1 - Gerald Spencer Pryse. "The Only Road For An Englishman."	133
Figure 2.1- Brad's apartment in <i>Pillow Talk</i>	255
Figure 2.2 - "The Playboy Town House"	255
Figure 2.3 - Brad's newly designed aparatment in <i>Pillow Talk</i>	258
Figure 2.4 - Louis Tesson. "Le harem sur le bosphore."	258
Figure 2.5 - Ben and Elaine in <i>The Graduate</i>	270
Figure 2.6 - Enchanted. Advertisement A	293
Figure 2.7 - Enchanted. Advertisement B	298
Figure 2.8 - Giselle in <i>Enchanted</i>	300
Figure 2.9 - Storybook in <i>Enchanted</i>	302
Figure 2.10 - Storybook in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	303
Figure 2.11 - Clementine and Joel in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind	317
Figure 2.12 - Edmund Leighton. "Abelard and His Pupil Heloise."	320
Figure 2.13 - Joel in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind	325
Figure 2.14 - Clementine in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind	326
Figure 2.14 - Joel and Clementine in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind	335

### **Introduction:**

#### Woolf's Shadow

I want to begin by suggesting that Virginia Woolf was our first feminist narratologist, at least among Anglophone writers. Even though this subfield of feminist and literary theory wouldn't be christened until long after Woolf's lifetime—by Susan Lanser in her eponymous 1986 essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology"—she was clearly engaged with topics now considered essential to this area of study, particularly the relationship between gender and literature. In *A Room of One's Own*, for instance, Woolf considers women's place within a long-standing masculinized literary culture in England. One of her main arguments in the essay, in fact, is that women's persistently lower socioeconomic status, in relation to men's, has entailed less access to this culture. In the final section of the essay, where she emphasizes that most of the great English poets and philosophers of the past century were affluent men, Woolf writes that

[intellectual] freedom depends on material things. Poetry depends on intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. (108)

This correspondence she notices—between women's material conditions and their intellectual pursuits—has a distinctly feminist character, insofar as it raises awareness of the role that gender and class may play in a woman's career. And more pointedly, Woolf explicitly references women's literary achievement here, as an endeavor impacted by one's social standing.

Many decades later, Lanser arrives at a similar insight. Like Woolf, she notices that a writer's positionality—constituted not only by gender and class but by history, race, language, psychology and other factors—is of paramount significance for literary production and interpretation. In calling for a more nuanced, context-oriented mode of narrative study, Lanser suggests that "[attention] to the rhetorical context of narrative its generic status and the public or private level of the narration—would be understood as important determinants of narrative meaning" (357). Indeed, a feminist intervention in narratology, as outlined in Lanser's essay, stands to widen and complicate the field of narrative interpretation and theory, potentially loosening narratological practice from its formalist harness. The narrative context Lanser describes here may begin with these formal elements—genre, narrative level—but may also include extratextual elements that contribute to a text's meaning. Against a "tendency in narratology to isolate texts from the contexts of their production and reception and hence from what 'political' critics think of as literature's ground of being," Lanser questions the purpose and impact of separating text from context in this way (344). As a consequence of this tendency, narratology has long treated gender-oriented questions as extraneous. Lanser claims that

[it] is readily apparent that virtually no work in the field of narratology has taken gender into account, either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses. This means, first of all, that the narratives which have provided the foundation for narratology have been either men's texts or texts treated as men's texts. (343)

Narratology, in other words, has a gender problem. As a field of study that has traditionally refrained from engaging with gender—and with other dimensions of narrative regarded as "contextual"—it was only a matter of time perhaps before feminist

scholars, like Lanser, started examining the assumptions and conventions that have sustained this practice of decontextualizing narrative.

Turning back to *A Room of One's Own*, then, I would point out that Woolf's essay, like Lanser's, makes the case that narratives are not produced in a vacuum, and that an inattention to context may distort a narrative's interpretation. To illustrate this point, Woolf considers nineteenth century novels by women, suggesting that many of these writers were obliged to write in a measured, agreeable style, perhaps anticipating a harsh reception from male critics:

The whole structure, therefore, of the early nineteenth-century novel was raised, if one was a woman, by a mind which was slightly pulled from the straight, and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority. One has only to skim those old forgotten novels and listen to the tone of voice in which they are written to divine that the writer was meeting criticism; [...] saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation, [...] admitting that she was 'only a woman,' or protesting that she was 'as good as a man. (74)

Woolf is quick to concede that her observation is not directed at *all* female novelists of this period, which of course includes Austen. She even attributes a special degree of genius to Austen, who "in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, [held] fast to the thing as [she] saw it without shrinking" (74). But among these earlier female novelists more generally, Woolf finds a strange duress in their writing. She notes a "docility and diffidence" in these texts, as though their authors were admonished to "write this, think that" (74-75).

Moreover, long before Lanser—and a cadre of others, notably including Robyn Warhol, Kathy Mezei, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Ruth Page, and Nancy K. Miller—Woolf calls attention to the context of narrative production, examining women's position

historically within literary culture. Because her work on *A Room of One's Own* began the same year—1928—that British women over 21 won the right to vote, it is not surprising that Woolf had suffrage on her mind and that she was trying to contextualize this form of progress in relation to a larger history of women's disempowerment (Phillips 339). In noticing a rising, vocal reaction to women's progress, she writes that

[no] age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own; those innumerable books by men about women in the British Museum are a proof of it. The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged. And when one is challenged, even by a few women in black bonnets, one retaliates, if one has never been challenged before, rather excessively. (99)

What I would underscore here is how Woolf locates this male backlash to feminism within literary culture. By her account, women's elevated political power provoked a curiously anxious—even retaliatory—sentiment among male authors, who seemed to regard women more as competitors than peers. Woolf observes a defensiveness among these men, where they felt "challenged" and thus provoked to desire "self-reassertion" (99), as though their grip on cultural and institutional power was loosening. Indeed, Woolf's essay is in some ways a meditation on women's access to these forms of power, particularly literary authorship and influence.

To convey a sense of the conditions for female writers in this period, she uses an extended metaphor of an all-enveloping shadow, "shaped something like the letter 'I'," which she encounters while reading a new novel by a prominent male author, "Mr. A" (99). Mr. A's writing, she notes, is more "direct" and "straightforward" than women's, notable as well for its "freedom of mind," "liberty of person" and "confidence," qualities

somehow encapsulated in the writer's use of that first person pronoun (99). The 'I' comes to represent masculine authorial agency, a pronoun which, when used, invokes a strange privilege for Mr. A., whose freedom of expression "had never been thwarted or opposed, but had full liberty from birth to stretch itself whichever way it liked" (99). Only Woolf's male contemporaries are afforded this expansive, unmitigated creative license. Male writers' long-standing, presumptive claim on literary authority—figured as this I-shaped "dark bar"—creates for female writers, as Woolf puts it, an "arid" space where "[n]othing] will grow" (99-100).

I would suggest as well that this 'I' represents narrative agency, the power not only to tell stories but to dictate the terms of how stories are told. As she looks upon the shelves of literature in the museum, Woolf notes the "innumerable books by men about women," where that 'I' continues to cast its shadow, blocking "the landscape behind it" and creating a space as "shapeless as mist" (100). Frustrated by this masculinized influence, which "block[s] the fountain of energy and shore[s] it within narrow limits," Woolf imagines a less encumbered, less regulated narrative space (100). Over half a century later, Woolfian scholar Margaret Homans picks up this line of inquiry, giving an account of female writers' relation to a literary culture historically slanted in men's favor. In much the same way Woolf decries books by men about women, Homans claims that "Oedipal, phallic narrative and narrative histories misrepresent women's experience" and that "new forms are needed that break narrative conventions and that perhaps even depart from narration altogether" (6-7). Homans even references *A Room of One's Own*, further developing this idea of narrative form's enthrallment to a masculinized literary

conventionality: "Linear narrative of the sort written by the contemporary novelist Mr. A in Woolf's hilarious account [in *A Room of One's Own*] is integrally connected to the dark bar 'I' that casts its obliterating shadow over everything around it" (6). Homans, like Woolf before her, wants to account for this strange, vexed relation between women and narrative conventionality—a relation that is of primary importance for feminist narratology. We could even say that the aim of feminist narratology, in some ways, is to examine and theorize the shadow Woolf describes, with a view toward offering an account of narrative form more attuned to the history of stories by and about women.

Whereas Woolf's interest in this question arose from her recognition of a long-standing, inveterate sexism within English literary culture, feminist narratology arose from a recognition among feminist literary critics of insufficiently examined points of cross-fertilization between feminism and narratology. In claiming Woolf as the first feminist narratologist, then, I am not suggesting that this subfield predates Lanser's essay; rather, I am calling attention to an underappreciated affinity between Woolf's long interest in women's literary marginalization and the subfield's interest in female authors' relation to narrative conventions and traditions. The shadow cast by that imperious, incluctable 'I' is a powerful metaphor for the mediated space within which women's literary narratives have often been written.

This dissertation, moreover, is focused upon narratives that emerge from behind that shadow, especially by altering or commenting on narrative conventionality. While some of these narratives eschew linearity, others forgo or modify different conventions of storytelling—for instance, story arcs, sequentiality, temporality, narrative resolution,

focalization, intra- and extradiegetic levels—that may overdetermine the forms a narrative may take. These instances of narrative modification are often expressive of feminist sentiment and thus require a particular mode of interpretation. In adding to traditional feminist concerns with gendered representation and subjectivity, here I am concerned with the many narrative disruptions, indeterminacies, and ambiguities that can serve as socially symbolic acts, in the sense Frederic Jameson theorizes in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). My dissertation argues, ultimately, that feminist intervention and critique may occur at the level of narrative form, often expressed through the very composition and sequencing of content within a narrative.

Each chapter here examines a different instance of narrative intervention as feminist critique and has two core objectives: to demonstrate a feminist narratological mode of interpretation and explain how these texts sidestep the long, "obliterat[ing]" shadow that has hovered above women's narratives (Woolf 100). Chapter One explains how Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* may be read as an emancipatory narrative, which is to say that its use of regionalism, emplotment and imagery function as modes of both feminist and antiracist critique. Against a recent tide of criticism suggesting that there are problems with its representations of and engagement with race, I argue that the novel's engagement with race does not necessarily equate to racism, nor irreparably damage its status as a quintessential feminist narrative. For while this critical reassessment of the novel has indeed served as a productive intervention, occasioning new readings more attentive to the social history of postbellum New Orleans, these

readings at times neglect how the novel's regionalism functions as antiracist critique and also how its emancipatory imagery and thematics extend across the color line.

In Chapter Two, I examine the queering of narrative time in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, explaining the various ways that the novel deconstructs and reimagines temporality. These temporal effects, I suggest, often occur in relation to a crisis of enforced or compulsory gender normativity. I read this relation as a key part of the novel's feminist rhetoric, its argument that time itself, in its myriad forms and constructions, is conditioned by gendered sociality. Foregrounding this connection between the novel's representation of a stifling social normativity and Woolf's use of temporal disjunction, I argue against the prevailing and most enduring readings of the novel that have, somewhat surprisingly, yet to sufficiently describe its temporal effects in relation to its distinctly queer feminism. *Mrs. Dalloway*'s Modernist aspirations, as I will show, are inseparable from its politics. Novelistic innovation and technique here have a distinct feminist rhetoric and can thus be read as a commentary upon the social strictures and anxieties of postwar London.

Chapter Three is focused upon Margaret Atwood's 1993 novel *The Robber Bride*, which was inspired by a characteristically macabre Brothers Grimm narrative. The novel contains multiple representations of women as victims: of sexual abuse, parental abandonment, marital infidelity, sexism in academia, and early childhood bereavement. These forms of victimhood may seem a far cry from being murdered and eaten—a horrifyingly real fate for women in the Grimms' story—but perhaps Atwood, in drawing from this old fairy tale, suggests that modern women are similarly vulnerable, that they

are at risk of being "consumed." I begin, then, by asking how consumption and consumability function as complementary tropes for the novel's examination of postfeminist womanhood and female companionship. I call its representations of womanhood post-feminist because each of the three main characters – Tony, Charis and Roz – roughly correspond to a particular dimension of second-wave feminism. Collectively, these characters are a testament to feminism's success, insofar as it has enhanced women's institutional, cultural and economic power. Zenia, on the other hand, represents something different. The novel's robber bride figure has many of the qualities of a classic *femme fatale*: cupidity, charm, guile, and allure. Zenia's antisocial tendencies are thrown into sharp relief, though, by the camaraderie and companionship among Tony, Charis and Roz. If the latter group embodies feminine unity and sisterhood, Zenia embodies a contempt for and cynicism towards these forms of sociality. Narratively, Zenia is a trickster figure: she engenders discord, disunity, and confusion for those around her. By situating this trickster within a close-knit circle of women, Atwood gives Zenia a sort of talismanic function: her proximity to Tony, Charis and Roz has a hexing effect. My argument in this chapter, moreover, is that Zenia's tricksterism functions as a stress test for feminism, in the sense that Atwood uses this character type to foment conflict for women represented as its beneficiaries. Atwood suggests with her postmodern trickster tale that intimacy and community among women are what sustain feminism, perhaps more so than other meaningful areas of women's lives such as their romantic relationships and careers.

And lastly, Chapter Four of my dissertation examines the tensions between feminism and cinematic romantic comedies. Treating the rom-com as a site of agonistic representational conflict, I read in the narratives discussed in this chapter a distinct ideological tussle, between warring conceptions of femininity and womanhood. I also consider what is at stake in these varied representations and narrativizations of women, showing how deviations from conventional rom-com narrative tropes function as a mode of feminist critique. In my close readings of the films Enchanted (2007) and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), I show that recent feminist interventions in romantic comedy have taken two primary forms: assimilatory and critical. The assimilatory feminist romcom, typified in *Enchanted*, is distinguished by a baseline feminism, as it were, or a basic level of feminist sensibility. And the critical feminist romcom, typified in *Eternal Sunshine*, is distinguished by a more probing investigation of the genre's narrative conventions and ideological underpinnings, mainly in relation to gender. In shifting my focus from literature to film in this final chapter of the dissertation, moreover, my intention is to widen the scope of the project to include a narrative form rarely thought of as feminist, but as I show, romantic comedy has taken on an increasingly feminist sensibility in recent years. This chapter gives an account of that sensibility, explaining how it manifests in two variations of this narrative genre.

The common thread running through these chapters, in general terms, is a focus on the interaction between gender and narrative. Informed by work in, and adjacent to, feminist narratology, my dissertation explains how and where narrative form has served as a site of feminist intervention and critique. Kathy Mezei has explained the core

objective of feminist narratology in this way: "[this mode of criticism] locates and deconstructs sites of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and transgression in aspects of narrative and in the sexuality and gender of author, narrator, character, and reader" (2). What follows is guided by this basic directive. In the texts examined here, I am searching for the obstructive, persistent shadow Woolf noticed all those years ago. I then explain how each text successfully evades this shadow, by utilizing narrative form in unconventional, subversive ways. Lastly, the title of my project pays homage to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's monumental feminist study, No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (1989). In a general sense, the aim of Gilbert and Gubar's threevolume project is to examine literary modernism through a feminist lens. Like Woolf, they make a case for reframing literary history and culture in terms of gendered tensions and inequities. In Volume One (The War of the Words), the authors posit that the "territory of literature [and also] the institutions of marriage and the family, of education and the professions [have become] a no man's land – a vexed terrain – in which scattered armies of men and women all too often clash by day and by night" (xiii). I see my project as both vexing the terrain, insofar as it participates in a counter-discourse of feminism's uneasy alliance with narratology, and also forging new interpretive possibilities among the texts that are part of this study.

## **Chapter One**

# Emancipatory Regionalism and Narrative Rhetoricity in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Long a fixture among canonical American feminist narratives, Kate Chopin's *The* Awakening (1899) has drawn sustained critical attention since at least the 1950s. Cyrille Arnavon's 1952 French translation of the novel, for instance, includes an introductory critical essay that begins to account for Edna's social position and Creole cultural milieu. <sup>1</sup> Kenneth Eble's essay "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" (1956), on the other hand, explores different dimensions of the novel, oriented more towards a formalist reading with special attention to character, setting and genre.<sup>2</sup> As second wave feminism, and particularly feminist literary criticism, fully emerged by the early 1960s, criticism of Chopin's novel began shifting to a more pointed examination of its representations of gender, often in relation to the social history of the postbellum South. In a comment emblematic of the novel's reception during this period, Larzer Ziff (1966) calls it "the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America, and the first fully to face the fact that marriage, whether in point of fact it closed the range of a woman's sexual experiences or not, was but an episode in her continuous growth" (299).<sup>3</sup> The Awakening, furthermore, has remained in subsequent years a touchstone not only of women's liberation but perhaps of an even more expansive notion of unencumbered modern selfhood not necessarily tied to gender. In John May's (1970) reading, for instance, he finds that through Edna Pontellier -- the novel's protagonist -- we discover the "perpetual frustration of desire that living entails"

and "the longing for freedom [that] become[s] the assertion of independence" (216). Jules Chametzky (1972), in a similar vein, argues that the novel offers a "glimpse of life as an autonomous self" and suggests "how to be free in one's self and for one's self but still meaningfully connected to others" (222). The novel, ultimately, ascended to veritable canonical status as a naturalist feminist text for much of the latter part of the twentieth century.

More recent critical work on the novel, however, has reinterpreted and reframed the novel as a narrative steeped in the racist social history of the post-Reconstruction Era South. Critics have asked whether the feminism often attributed to the novel is overridden, or rendered specious, by Chopin's failure to confront the racism typical of 1890s New Orleans in a more direct, sustained way. Michelle Birnbaum (1994) argues that the novel unwittingly participates in the "colonial production of white female selfhood and sexuality" (302). Helen Taylor (1989), even more forcefully, has argued that "Chopin's racism [in *The Awakening*] is a central element [...], and cannot be ignored or simply excused" (156). And in one of the strongest criticisms of the novel, Elizabeth Ammons (1991) writes that "[the] repression of black women's stories—and with them Edna's identity as oppressor as well as oppressed—plunges not just Edna but also Chopin into a killing silence from which neither returns" (75). These arguments claiming that *The Awakening* is a racist text, and therefore flawed in its feminist aims, have indeed served as a productive intervention, occasioning new readings of the novel more attentive to the social history of postbellum New Orleans. This turn in the criticism necessarily impacts its perception as a feminist narrative: it obliges consideration of

whether the feminism long ascribed to the novel extends to women who don't share Edna's racial identity or class position. Understandably, this concern has grown more central for critics, and this chapter considers further their approach. Therefore, while I begin here by acknowledging the importance of these arguments, my own discussion of *The Awakening* will supplement this line of commentary on its engagement with race, by explaining how its regionalism and narrative rhetoricity may still be regarded as feminist, even as a new conventional perception of the novel has emerged.

That is, despite its questionable treatment of race—addressed in the chapter's first section—I argue that Chopin's novel remains a fundamentally emancipatory narrative, and an instance of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have termed "minor literature." This literary mode, the authors explain, is inherently political, distinguished in part by its representation of "cramped space" (Deleuze and Guattari 17), where a person or group is shown to be socially marginalized, and their mobility somehow constrained. "Minor" in this context is meant to connote attenuated power or standing; a minor literature, furthermore, fosters narrative identifications with marginalized positionalities, making possible a more empathic relation between reader and text. The Awakening functions in this way: its narrative invites identification with figures somehow marginalized, particularly on the basis of gender and race. Readers are mainly positioned to identify with Edna; as the protagonist, her emergence from a cramped social space is given the most narrative prominence, but hers is not the only point of identification available. The novel contains other marginalized characters, some appearing only briefly, that comprise a diversity of race, culture, and class. Also, and critically, we can

read in Chopin's treatment of this diversity a critique of the racism present in Edna's social space—a form of critique, it's important to note, that would not have been common among her peers.<sup>5</sup> In an article reflecting her multidecade period of critical engagement with this novel, its historical background, and its interpretive community, Anna Shannon Elfenbein (2009) arrives at the conclusion that "Chopin [...] transcended the racist self-flattery to which most of the other white southern authors of her day had resorted by populating their fiction with black characters who are happy despite the subservience and backbreaking work that are their lot" (179). Elfenbein acknowledges the novel's occasional reliance on stereotype but also argues that, unlike common literature of the period, *The Awakening* contains refined, critical representations of racial and class differences, and that these features enhance its realism. She writes that,

Chopin's depiction of black and mixed-race characters, albeit sketchy and in some respects stereotypical by the standards of our own time, was enlightened relative to the manner in which her white southern contemporaries had portrayed such characters inasmuch as it refuted the myth of contented servitude by realistically rendering their alienation from their work and their employers. (180)

The rendering Elfenbein describes here is most discernible in descriptions of black characters' nonverbal behaviors, which suggest not only alienation but despair and disquiet. These subtleties in the narrative, as I explain further below, can be read as a commentary on—and an implicit rebuke of—the racist social environment represented in the novel.

Additionally, insofar as the novel fosters a deeper sensibility for individuals inhabiting cramped, marginalized spaces, it aligns with a further dimension of Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature. They explain that,

[minor literature] produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (17)

In other words, writers working in this mode may create narratives that envision alternate forms of community and engender new modes of sensibility, even against skeptics who doubt these functions of literature. Building on the premise that this instrumentalization of narrative, as a "collective [...] and even revolutionary" (Deleuze and Guattari 17) literary medium, may deepen readers' sensibilities for the marginalized, this chapter will explain each of the following: how the novel's treatment of race encodes an emancipatory thematics; how its regionalism relates to and typifies minor literature; and ultimately, how its narrative rhetoricity functions as feminist critique. My discussion of *The Awakening*, moreover, extends the dissertation's thesis by locating feminist sentiment in a narrative's genre and rhetorical function.

As a secondary goal, this chapter also aspires to bring into dialogue scholarship on *The Awakening* focused upon the novel's regionalism and other criticism focused more upon its engagement with race. Surprisingly, the points of exchange and collaboration between these two areas have been minimal, really only given proper attention by Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse in their 2003 study of American regionalism by women, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*. While Fetterley and Pryse's study is an invaluable contribution to feminist criticism of *fin de siècle* American fiction, it is more interested in the period's general features and questions than in offering a narrower, more sustained look at

particular authors and texts. They do at times reference Chopin as a writer insufficiently recognized for the progressive politics of her artistic choices: "Chopin [...] chooses to use her own access to publication to critique those modes of representation that serve the ideology of local color, that reinforce and simplify class and race hierarchies, and that seek to fix people in their place" (288). They also give a wonderful theorization of queer regionalism in *The Awakening*:

In Mlle. Reisz and her 'region of the gasoline stove,' [Chopin] constructs a regionalist character to carry the burden of the queer, the unconventional, and the sexually radical. Otherwise Edna herself would surely merit these labels, as numerous conversations with her disapproving husband elsewhere in the novel imply. Chopin queers Mlle. Reisz, or more accurately, includes a regionalist character in her novel in order to 'normalize' Edna's sexuality, which might otherwise seem deviant rather than legitimate (338).

These accounts of Chopin's progressivism and queer narratology indeed inform my own approach to the novel, but the present chapter looks closer at the intersection between race, genre, and narrative rhetoricity. This is a dimension of the novel not yet examined in a way that settles—or simply speaks to— the question of how our perception of Chopin's engagement with race could be impacted by a consideration of these other factors. This chapter, moreover, draws from work in narrative theory and semiotics in order to show how *The Awakening* can be read as a complex emancipatory narrative, a text that evades Woolf's shadow in three ways: by rejecting patriarchal teleology, critiquing normalized racism in postbellum New Orleans, and using regionalism to question the period's investment in a collectivized, homogenous "American literature." In providing this account, ultimately, I aim to advance the dissertation's central argument that manipulations of narrative form may be expressive of feminist critique. Narrative

turns and trajectories, for instance, may be read rhetorically; they may confirm or question assumptions brought by a reader to a text. Informed by Susan Page's *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology* (2006), where she explores the basic but consequential idea that "cultural values of gender have some relationship with patterns of organization in telling stories" (27), this chapter considers how Chopin's novel engages these patterns and leverages narrative in ways that come to function as a critique of post-Reconstruction Era social conditions in New Orleans.

# Race, feminism, narrative

This first section acts as a rebuttal to more recent re-readings of *The Awakening* that object to describing the novel as feminist. Naturally, these readings offer varying accounts of the novel's problematic engagement with race, but they tend to arrive at a similar conclusion: that the conditions necessary for Edna's awakening are secured by the domestic labors of nonwhite characters often relegated to the narrative periphery. I begin here for two reasons: to engage with more recent criticism of a text that has drawn steady scholarly attention for over half a century, and to build a clearer context for my claim that Chopin's narrative creates points of nonwhite identification and empathy that extend the novel's larger emancipatory thematics.

As explained above, the emergence—particularly since the 1980s—of a feminism more inclusive of and responsive to the vital differences *among* women has inspired these re-readings of the novel better attuned to critical orientations like postcolonialism and antiracist theory, which center racialized identity in a more deliberate way. This question

of the novel's engagement with race has occasioned a productive intervention in more recent generations of scholarship, which has questioned how the novel can be considered feminist when its feminism may seem limited to the interests of particular white women. Helen Taylor (1994), for instance, has said of the novel, rather damningly, that "black suffering, slavery, and oppression are all linguistically and thematically appropriated for white women" (201). Critics have noted as well the marginal placement of black women in the novel. Elizabeth Ammons argues that the "individual black women who do emerge from the background [...] are finally no more that types, human categories — unexamined representatives of the novel's repressed African American context" and that "images of black people in *The Awakening* [...] are stereotypic and demeaning" (74-75). Reading Taylor and Ammons, we are led to a vexed yet necessary question: does this novel's feminism extend across the color line, making it a truly emancipatory narrative in the sense meant by this chapter's title?

While we are now at the point where any serious reading of Chopin's novel must acknowledge its race problem, a different sort of problem arises when or if a perception of the novel as racist crystallizes to the point where its feminism is regarded as inescapably tainted, and somehow less effectual than earlier critics thought. If earlier criticism of the novel is problematic, it is in part because race was given scant or insufficient attention, not necessarily because older essays by eminent feminist scholars like Sandra Gilbert and Jules Chametzky were wrong in their estimation of the novel's feminism.<sup>6</sup> Chametzky writes that *The Awakening* "shows [...] beautifully the pressures working against woman's true awakening to her condition, and what that condition is"

(42). This general claim of the novel remains relevant, as it gestures at the historical conditions for many women in 1890s New Orleans, which are central to the novel's social commentary. Still, later critics began questioning which women and which conditions Chametzky and others were actually describing. Birnbaum (1994), for instance, has provided a brilliant reading of the novel's racialized language, characters, and spaces. In particular, Birnbaum argues that Chopin appropriates language traditionally given to the horrors of slavery to render Edna's "indescribable oppression" (8): "By initiating her escape from gender convention through the rhetoric of racial oppression, Edna reinforces rather than razes class and race differences" (304). Taylor, too, is concerned with how an implied analogy between patriarchal marriage and slavery functions in the novel: "The analogy between bourgeois white marriage and slavery reveals the limitations of contemporary southern women's racist feminism" (307). For these critics, the novel reinforces social inequalities and neglects differences among women. These are productive and necessary criticisms of the novel, and they have complicated – in gainful ways – how we read and think about *The Awakening*. It appears now that in their haste to recover and canonize Chopin's novel as an early feminist narrative that anticipated Modernist themes, some critics of the 1960s and 1970s were so eager to theorize Edna's femininity that they neglected – or perhaps just didn't go far enough in thinking about – her whiteness.

We may recall that it wasn't until the 1980s that bell hooks notably called for an intersectional feminism attentive to discrete subject positionalities: "Feminists [of the 1960s and 70s] have largely been unable to speak to, with, and for diverse groups of

women because they either do not understand fully the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression or refuse to take this inter-relatedness seriously" (14).<sup>7</sup> This critique of a feminism insufficiently engaged with differences among women has arguably been the most consequential influence upon contemporary feminist criticism. That is, the interpretive atmosphere or climate from the 1980s onward has been one where questions about sexuality, race, class, nationality and culture are of paramount interest for feminist criticism. Naturally, then, it is not surprising that so much of the critical work done on *The Awakening* since the 80s has shifted attention to the novel's engagement with racialized identity. These more recent generations of scholarship reflect an enduring aspiration to theorize and explicate racial differences among women and representations of those differences in literature. It is obvious that this aspiration bodes well for contemporary feminism's ongoing advocacy for and concern with ever more types of women and women's experiences.

Still, even as feminist literary criticism benefits from this progressive intervention, opening critical perspectives more attentive to crucial differences among women, challenges persist in our negotiation of this new discursive space. *The Awakening* is an excellent test case in this regard, not only because it contains representations of racial difference among women but because its reception history bridges different waves of feminist thought. The emergence of intersectionality, for instance, as an essential theoretical lens for third wave feminism has inspired critical reassessments of Chopin's novel, typified by the work of Taylor, Ammons and Birnbaum noted above. Their work prioritizes race in ways earlier criticism does not, reframing the

novel as a story largely about white privilege and marginalized women of color. Equally impactful has been Toni Morrison's 1993 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the published version of a series of lectures she gave at Harvard in 1990.8 One of Morrison's most forceful, resonant arguments in this text bears directly upon *The Awakening*, as she calls for a more forthright engagement with black presence in literary narratives:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States [...] The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination. (5)

Like Ammons, Morrison notices this tendency, among texts and readers, to marginalize or repress black presence. There's an opportunity, if not an obligation, to account for this presence in a much more focused manner, particularly in discussions of a novel's feminism. That is, one of the implications of Morrison work—its call for a literary criticism that intentionally centers black representation—is a reexamination of texts like *The Awakening*, where black female characters are present but peripheral. Several such characters appear in Chopin's narrative – the Pontellier's "quadroon" nurse/nanny (13), Madame Lebrun's "little negro girl" (32), the "mulatresse" café proprietor Catiche (99), among others – but their presence is often muted or accessorized, leading critics like Birnbaum and Ammons to consider both what these representations may signify and whether they are born of a racist semiotics.

While these characters are generally situated in the narrative periphery, appearing only fleetingly, their presence throughout the novel is so frequent, and often so carefully described, that by novel's end, they attain a curious prominence. Birnbaum and Taylor read this prominence in part as a feature of Chopin's social realism and regionalism, in that over a quarter of New Orleans' population was black in the 1890s, but also as a feature of her racism, in that her treatment of these characters is arguably exploitative and degrading. I read this paradoxical prominence of black women in the novel – where they are often silent and off-camera but repeatedly alluded to – differently. Whereas Birnbaum regards Chopin as a "colonizer" whose suppression of racism's essential horror is "part of the collective amnesia regarding the abuses and uses of the color line in the postwar South" (303), and Taylor calls Chopin "nostalgic" for the antebellum "black/white relations of her childhood" (299), I read the novel's treatment of race as strategic, evincing a subtle but suggestive engagement with and representation of racial difference.

Joyce Dyer, in her 2002 essay "Reading *The Awakening* with Toni Morrison," has taken up a similar position, arguing for a more nuanced, more charitable assessment of the novel. Inspired by Morrison, Dyer sets out to reread the novel and revisit its race problem, and what she finds seems to surprise her:

If we are looking for powerful, well-drawn black characters, we will not find them. What we will find, however, is evidence on nearly every page that *The Awakening* is a silent meditation on the dangerous subject of race. [...] In [Chopin's novel] there is an enormous black presence, often menacing, and sometimes capable of sabotaging not only the white characters in Chopin's novel, but also the very text itself. (140)

Dyer calls this black presence a "menacing" presence because of the ways it unsettles the narrative. For instance, in arguably the clearest example of this phenomenon, Robert visits his mother while she is using a sewing machine. As Madame Lebrun is "busily engaged at the sewing machine," we are told that a "little black girl sat on the floor, and with her hands worked the treadle of the machine" (21). Rather than leaving it to her reader to infer the reason for the child's assistance, Chopin then adds: "The Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health" (21). The treadle work, it seems, is beneath Madame Lebrun, both literally and figuratively. Chopin delineates here between the forms of labor suited for a white Creole woman and a young black girl, creating a nuanced impression of racial and class difference in a domestic setting, which can be read as a feature of the narrative's realism.

Does the novel's placement of the girl on the floor – where she operates perilous equipment at the pleasure of her superior – therefore express complicity with, or a callous passivity towards, this racialized social order? Or could it perhaps be read as a plain account of a domestic scene that is somehow both mundane and dismaying? The scene is mundane because it contains a rather uneventful meeting between Robert and his mother; in some ways, it is a forgettable moment in the story. In a different way, though, it is the novel's most poignant instance of a marginalized black presence. While Robert and his mother speak, the girl's appearance isn't further described; instead, the narration repeatedly notes the sound of the treadle-powered sewing machine: "Clatter, clatter, clatter, bang!" (22). Over and over again, these onomatopoeic sequences interrupt paragraphs and sentences in the remainder of the chapter, repeatedly emphasizing the

girl's presence. The narrative space in this scene is filled with sounds that come to represent racialized, class-inflected labor. So this banal meeting between mother and son has a dismal undertone, as we are made to bear witness to a child's servitude. As Dyer puts it, "racism was deafening to Chopin's ear, as it is to ours in [this chapter]" (149).

Another way that the novel suggestively engages with racial difference is through subtleties in descriptions of servants. On the one hand, as Birnbaum rightly points out, these many, often racialized servants in the novel are "necessary for [Edna's] liberation" (307), which is to say that one woman's empowerment comes at the expense of others' sustained disempowerment. This is a fair criticism of the dynamic between Edna and her mainly female domestic staff, and even of the more general class stratification represented in the novel. It doesn't fully account, however, for a subtlety in the actual images of these characters. Dyer refers to this subtlety as a "code," one that "lets us recognize that the servants are not always what they seem to be" (143). For instance, right at the beginning of the novel, Chopin describes the countenance of the nurse looking after Edna's children—effectively, their nanny—as having a "far-away, meditative air" (4). Later, the same little girl who worked the sewing machine treadle for Madame Lebrun is described as "sweeping the galleries with long, absent-minded strokes of the broom" (32). And later still, as Edna stands on the front veranda seeing Léonce off to work, their nurse's face is again described curiously as she looks after Edna's boys: "The boys were dragging along the banquette a small 'express wagon,' which they had filled with blocks and sticks. The quadroon was following them with little quick steps, having assumed a fictitious animation and alacrity for the occasion" (51). The reason

Dyer sees a coded subtext in these descriptions is because Edna's "servants are not always described quite as we would expect them to be"; they are "discontent, detached from their roles and the world they have been forced to occupy—and we sense their potential for explosiveness" (143). I would argue that the booming and clattering of the servant girl's treadle are explosive in this way: they are images and sounds that encode something withheld or unspeakable.

From a technical standpoint, encoded narrative content bears upon the distinction narratology draws between syuzhet and fabula; both Russian terms, syuzhet refers to "the way a story is organized" while *fabula* refers to "the raw material of a story." Syuzhet, that is, names the process of "how" a narrative is configured or composed; *fabula* names the actual content or material of the narrative, or the "what." With respect to the details from The Awakening I've been discussing, the placement and frequency of these suggestive images—where a black character's malaise or alienation are emphasized—are elements of the narrative's syuzhet. One function of syuzhet, as a discrete feature of narrative, is to create a kind of subtext, or code. When Dyer, then, refers to images of detached, distant black characters as a narrative code, she is implying that they may require a form of interpretation different from traditional close reading. While she doesn't actually name this interpretive form, she does specify that, "[what she tries] to do when [she reads] *The Awakening* now is to read it as a writer—to discover what codes or fears or dilemmas or hopes or confusions or anxieties about race are part of the dream that informs Chopin's imagination" (143). Taking this a step further, I would suggest that the kind of reading Dyer describes here aligns with my main argument in this section: the novel's steady accumulation of suggestive images of black despair—a feature of its syuzhet—provokes our compassion as readers, and it also extends the novel's function as an emancipatory narrative.

Moreover, this work of further complicating and accounting for the novel's engagement with race, as this opening section aspires to, is both problematic and essential, reflective in some ways of tensions occasioned by what W. E. B. Du Bois famously refers to, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), as "the problem of the color line" (29). The novel, that is, contains a recognition of the racism in Edna's social milieu but is, as Dyer puts it, "unavoidably, habitually, playing in the dark" (142). This titular metaphor of Morrison's book refers to white writers' benighted or uncritical engagement with black presences: "Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force" (Morrison 46). Morrison calls this presence a mediating force, it seems, because it necessarily acts upon the writer's imagination, upon the stories they tell. Chopin is playing in the dark, so to speak, because she is narrativizing the unnarratable unnarratable because the reality of race, as a social category, exceeded the grasp of even the most conscientious writers. As Dyer puts it, "at times [...] the truth about race in America haunted and overwhelmed Chopin—and became so great it led to the temporary loss of artistic control" (149). Still, a temporary loss of control is not the same as a sustained, active antipathy, which is the sentiment we associate with racism. Even if the novel fails to explore the subjectivity and humanity of these servants, it nevertheless

contains a coded or suggestive commentary on the beleaguered conditions for African Americans in the late nineteenth century. Dyer provides an excellent account of the relation between this commentary and Edna's awakening:

The meditative air and the absent-mindedness of the servants, so similar to Edna's increasing thoughtfulness and new, bewildering dreams—along with the mutual fictions of their lives—help us to understand that blacks do not function solely to help Edna purchase her freedom, but, rather, to show us how pervasive the absence of freedom is in American society and how much restlessness lies just below our nation's surface. (144)

It seems there is indeed a way to read the novel as both feminist and antiracist, insofar as it successfully demonstrates this absence of freedom for women across the color line.

This, then, is the first sense in which I read *The Awakening* as an emancipatory narrative: it expresses an uneasiness towards the normalized racism typical of the postbellum South, in distinction from other regionalist fiction of the period, which often romanticizes antebellum culture and society. Chopin's novel does more to advance than sidestep the bold work required of genuinely transgressive art during this period—containing richer, more complex representations of black identities—which bell hooks has described in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992):

For those of us [...] who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. (4)

While I acknowledge that the images of black characters in *The Awakening* do not quite reach the degree of transformative vision hooks captures here, I also maintain that their

frequent presence in the narrative, coupled with their general bleakness, elicits our compassion as readers. Insofar as we concede this function of the narrative, we can begin to recognize how the novel's engagement with race even bears upon both Edna's characterization and the depiction of her social space, which Elfenbein (2009) has noticed as well: "[The] representations of characters of color and ambiguous race in [Chopin's] novel enrich its social texture and enhance its characterization of the tragic false consciousness of Edna Pontellier [;] far from being a blot on this great novel, these representations are evidence of Chopin's genius as a literary realist" (183). These enriched representations deepen our sense of what Dyer describes as this period's "pervasive [...] absence of freedom of American society" (144). However peripheral or coded or subtle, these images of an oppressed black population in the postbellum South signify an objection. Just as the novel elicits an empathy for Edna's conflict with and alienation from Creole gendered conventionality, so too does it elicit, in a more oblique way, empathy for these other characters undermined by a culture resistant to modernization. It is an emancipatory narrative in that it calls attention to multiple forms of social disempowerment.

### Regionalism's Feminist Rhetoric

The second way I would like to discuss Chopin's novel as an emancipatory narrative pertains to its relation to genre and feminism. As a regionalist writer, Chopin contributes to a literary genre which, in the postbellum era, has come to be regarded a site of dialogical critical conversation. Regionalist narratives, Fetterley and Pryse explain, "pose both a critique of and a resistance to the cultural ideologies that realism

naturalizes" (4). Frank Davey (1997) has even described regionalism as a subordinate or marginalized discourse, one that "represents a general social or political strategy for resisting meanings generated by others in a nation-state, particularly those generated in geographic areas which can be constructed by the regionalism as central or powerful" (4). I begin this section, then, by suggesting that *The Awakening*'s regionalism functions in this way: it resists discursive practices that naturalize patriarchy and racism. To be clear, this should not imply that non-regionalist texts of the period are somehow, of necessity, patriarchal or racist; rather, regionalist narratives like Chopin's tend to engage with these dominant ideologies in different ways. With these texts, the very idea or rhetoric of "region" is taken up as a subordinate position from which to critically examine systems of disempowerment. Chopin's choice to emphasize region over nation is a kind of argument: it pushes back against the totalizing aspiration to a collective "national" literature, or even a national identity. As Fetterley and Pryse explain,

[many] of the texts of regionalism contradict ideas of the 'American' and of American literature that were in their formative stages after the Civil War, became crystallized in the political philosophy of the Theodore Roosevelt era, and in the twentieth century served U.S. imperialism. (2)

As an ascendant imperial power in the late nineteenth century, the U.S. was still a relatively young nation, still unsure of its identity and direction. Roosevelt, however, had fairly clear ideas about the "spirit" of his nation, as we find in a speech he gave in April of 1894, seven years before his presidency:

In the first place we wish to be broadly American and national, as opposed to being local or sectional. We do not wish, in politics, in literature, or in art, to develop that unwholesome parochial spirit, that over-exaltation of the little community at the expense of the great nation, which produces what has been

described as the patriotism of the village, the patriotism of the belfry. ("True Americanism" 51-52)

This avowed exclusion of the "local" or "sectional" is in line with the imperialist aspiration to a monoculture, where the "parochial spirit" and the "little community" are snuffed out so that the "great nation" can thrive and solidify. Part of this imperialist work, for Roosevelt, was stewardship of the literary canon. As Lawrence Oliver (1989) explains, for Roosevelt, "the literary and the political were inextricably linked" (93). Fetterley and Pryse take this line of thinking further, calling Roosevelt "the architect of an American imperialism understood as an explicitly racial enterprise," where he would "make appointments and support projects [promoting] a specifically white male canon of American literature dedicated to [...] 'the ideology of true Americanism'" (28). Against this measured projection of "American-ness" – this newly emergent politics of exclusion and stratification – regionalism valorized the very things deemed inessential to American national identity: women's writing, African-American subjectivities, dialectical diversity, queerness, vernacular cultures, provincial locales, and local (as opposed to national) histories.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that some of the most distinguished, most canonical American fiction writers of this period are indeed associated with regionalism. I would argue, though, that many do not achieve, nor seem intent on achieving, the kind of critique Fetterley and Pryse describe above: a narrative expressive of resistance to the cultural and social ideologies that realism naturalizes. Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Sherwood Anderson, for instance, indeed use regional settings in their fiction, at times expressing social commentary on these places, yet it is debatable the extent to which

these writers explore the meaning of "region" as distinct from "nation." It is debatable, that is, whether they instrumentalize "local color" as a narrative mode intended to disrupt the period's aspirations to a national literature, or if perhaps their "local" writing hews closer to realism, where verisimilitude is itself an intrinsic aesthetic quality and not necessarily an instrument of critique. Surely we can think of American realist narratives – with some characteristics of regionalist fiction – that go beyond mimesis and clearly issue social critique: Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893), Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900), and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905) are all contemporary works of fiction that engage in some form of critique, and their northeastern regional settings are significant from an interpretive perspective. But again, it's arguable whether these narratives engender the same kind of deep skepticism and resistance towards oppressive social structures that I would suggest Chopin's novel does. The tragic fate of Crane's Maggie Johnson certainly raises questions about the social conditions for women in New York near the turn of the century, as does the similar fate of Wharton's Lily Bart. Both characters are effectively defeated by a social environment with dire prospects for unmarried, indigent women. But Crane and Wharton are working in a naturalist mode, which is to say that their novels stage conflicts between the individual and her environment not necessarily to politicize these conflicts but simply to present them starkly, and without explanation. One distinction we could make between Crane and Dreiser's naturalism and Chopin's regionalism, then, is that only the latter narrative mode is inherently political. While it is true that Crane's Maggie and Wharton's Lily demonstrate women's class struggles – struggles associated in part with

New York City in the 1890s – these characters are not imbued with the sort of questioning, disquieted psychic life that we see with Chopin's Edna. Edna's struggle is more existential; she is imbued with a deeper interiority and a more complex psychology. Chopin also emphasizes Edna's alienation from Creole femininity, so her struggle is indeed linked in some ways to a particular region. But what most distinguishes *The Awakening* from these other novels of the period is its proto-feminism, its unsubtle critique of the old-world, Southern patriarchal ideology she encountered in Louisiana. This is where Chopin's regionalism takes on a distinct rhetoricity: her representation of regional particularity is a repudiation of Roosevelt's call for art that is "broadly American and national."

# Regionalism as minor literature

As a regionalist narrative, *The Awakening* also takes up what could be called a minoritarian discursive position, insofar as the novel functions as "minor literature," a concept introduced above, which Deleuze and Guattari develop in their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975). This concept is useful for theorizing regionalism's relation to feminism because it accounts for both the interplay between social context and narrative content and the inherently political function of marginalized literatures.

### Deleuze and Guattari explain that one feature

of minor literatures is that everything in them is political. In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background; this is so much the case that none of these Oedipal intrigues are specifically indispensable or absolutely necessary but all become as one in a large space. Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus

becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. (16)

The Awakening is replete with this kind of cramped space, which serves as a site for the individual's negotiation of political intrigue or entanglement. The novel's first image is literally a cramped space – a birdcage – and immediately invokes notions of restricted mobility and abated agency. There is also a "stifling atmosphere" on Grand Isle (35). But the novel's most prominent cramped space is arguably Edna's very interiority, the site of an "indescribable oppression" (8); there is as well a "mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (14).

These various figurations of confinement are of a piece with the novel's larger feminist thematics; they are political in the sense Deleuze and Guattari describe above. The story vibrating within Edna is her private, ineffable distress, described variously as a "vague anguish" (8), an "impression [...] of something unattainable" (32), and a "monotonous agitation" (72). Collectively, these features of Edna's interiority suggest an individual in tension with her social milieu. Edna's "individual concern," as Deleuze and Guattari put it, is both political and existential, which distinguishes Chopin's narrative from their account of "major literature." Whereas major literature, by their theory, treats individuals as part of an undifferentiated mass – "all become as one" – minor literature is oriented towards particularity, marginal spaces, and counterdiscourse. They explain further that minor literature

produces an active solidarity despite skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (17)

This notion of group solidarity in the face of skepticism aligns with the novel's hints of an inchoate feminism, which appears in various forms; the most prominent example may be Edna's relationship with Mademoiselle Reisz. More than anyone else, Mlle. Reisz dignifies Edna's "impassioned newly awakened being" (44). She encourages Edna's rising liberatory sentiment, imparting this unsubtle political aphorism: "The bird that would soar above the level plan of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (79). This recalls the caged bird in the novel's opening, and it also deepens Edna's association – and perhaps Mlle. Reisz's as well – with a supersession of tradition, and with a repudiation of prejudice. There is clearly an affinity between the two women. Mlle. Reisz's brilliant piano playing and free spirit appeal to Edna, as does her insight into the soul of an artist: "To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—which have been acquired by one own's effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul," which "dares and defies" (60). In a sense, Mlle. Reisz has already dared and defied, not just as a free-spirited artist but as an unmarried middle-aged woman without children. She is a foil to Adèle Ratignolle and the "mother-women" (9), the novel's strongest evocation of a normative femininity, and is made to seem out of step with her community; a local grocery store owner even calls her "the most disagreeable and unpopular woman" to ever live on his street (56). Even as Edna continues to visit and confide in her, she too recalls the "disagreeable impression" Mlle. Reisz has made on her and considers her personality "offensive" (55, 75). Mlle. Reisz's often noted disagreeability, we begin to notice, is conspicuously gendered; there is an implicit

feminine propriety she seems to offend, as in this vaguely condemnatory account of her movements, physical appearance, and clothing: "She made an awkward, imperious little bow as she went in. She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face [...] She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair" (25). Still, in spite of whatever irritation she elicits, Mlle. Reisz holds a certain fascination for Edna. Her nonconformity and individualism resonate with Edna, who comes to realize, over the course of the story, that she identifies more with Mlle. Reisz and her lifestyle than with Adèle and the mother-women.

I would suggest, moreover, that the closeness between these two women is an example of the solidarity typical of minor literature, where a narrative may prefigure alternative communities and sensibilities. Edna and Mlle. Reisz's friendship may not quite amount to feminist solidarity, but their mutual aversion to tradition evokes political dissent, as does the novel's title. Edna's awakening, that is, entails a keener understanding of the social role she has acceded to but now questions; she privately recognizes how her new desires amount to "something unattainable" (32). In confiding these desires to Mlle. Reisz – her love for Robert, her plan to live apart from her husband, her artistic ambitions – Edna finds an unexpected ally. Mlle. Reisz doesn't attempt to dissuade Edna from doing these things; rather, she presses Edna to speak more truthfully. After Edna says that she is moving because she is "tired [of] looking after [her] big house" and keeping "too many servants," Mlle. Reisz questions this explanation: "That is not your true reason, ma belle. There is no use in telling me lies. I don't know your reason, but you have not told me the truth" (76). She intuits Edna's undisclosed reasons,

deepening our sense of their affinity, and she is unperturbed by Edna's intentions. These two characters, ultimately, are oriented towards the "individual concern" (Deleuze and Guattari 16), a marginal or minoritized narrative position. Mlle. Reisz is a marginal figure in this sense of being a nonconformist who thwarts gendered propriety, and she is also the closest Edna has to a maternal figure. As a dimension of minor literature, their mutual affinity may be read "to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (Deleuze and Guattari 17). The novel certainly forges these possibilities, using Edna's relationship with Mlle. Reisz to foreshadow new community among marginalized women, which may be a precursor for feminism.

Along with this marginalization of the individual, the novel's genre is also marginalized, as a regional narrative. And while calling *The Awakening* "marginalized" is perhaps debatable, I would specify that its regionalism is clearly out of step with, if not deliberately opposed to, Rooseveltian canonicity: a status afforded to texts distinguished by their adventurism, hypermasculinity, and chauvinistic love of nation. <sup>12</sup> These are not necessarily features of Deleuze and Guattari's "major literatures," which deemphasize both intersubjective dynamics ("all become as one in a large space") and chronotopic pressures ("the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background"), but they are clearly in contrast with what are here called "minor literatures," which emphasize the political, the social, and, I would argue, the regional. Minor literature can encompass regionalism when the latter is politicized, and when intrasubjectivity—the dynamics and

workings within a single character's mind rather than between multiple minds—is prominent in a narrative, as in Chopin's novel.

Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari's theory gives an account of the narrative primacy of the "individual" over and against the collective: "A writer [of minor literature]," they write, "is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allow[ing] the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (17). Chopin's novel functions in both of these ways: it envisions a sub-community of/for women within a larger, surrounding patriarchal community, through Edna's relationships with Mlle. Reisz and even Adele. And it also depicts a woman's consciousness transformed by newfound self-knowledge. Chopin thus takes up a minoritarian position with respect to the prevailing discursive regime, figured in the novel as institutional and social practices that disempower women. The Awakening can be considered a "minor" literary work as it provides space for marginalized subjectivities to emerge and occupy prominent positions within a narrative. To the extent that the novel's regionalism is the very thing that enables these spaces and positions to materialize, it also has a particular rhetoricity: the narrative's regionalism is an argument against "true Americanism," which tends to prescribe and limit the subjectivities that may occupy these spaces/positions. This is perhaps what Fetterley and Pryse allude to in suggesting that "the refusal of white women regionalists to place their fictions in the service of reproducing 'true Americanism' or white Anglo-Saxon masculinity [acts as a] form of both antisexist and antiracist work" (28). This refusal—this preference for a

narrative that explores and engages with diversity of gender and race—is a demonstration of regionalism's capacity to engage in feminist critique.

Regionalism in *The Awakening*, moreover, makes clear that even as postbellum New Orleans modernized and became a freer, more integrated social setting, the larger, surrounding, centuries-old cultures of patriarchy and racism endured. The presence of Edna's father, for instance, who was a "colonel in the Confederate army, and still maintained, with the title, the military bearing which had always accompanied it" (Chopin 65), is an unambiguous signifier of the antebellum South and its racist legacy. His arrival conjures a particular nostalgia for Edna's husband, Léonce:

Mr. Pontellier warmed up and grew reminiscent. He told some amusing plantation experiences, recollections of old Iberville and his youth, when he hunted possum in company with some friendly darky; thrashed the pecan trees, shot the [birds], and roamed the woods and fields in mischievous idleness. (67)

This is the only time in the novel where Léonce thinks or speaks of plantation life. We also notice, of course, that Chopin uses the racist "darky" epithet here, indicative of Léonce's interiority, his wistful "reminiscing" about the Plantation era. The Colonel functions as a symbol: he represents both the Confederate States Army and the Old South. Not only does his presence introduce this wistfulness for antebellum culture in the South, but he also becomes a mouthpiece for a patriarchal marriage. He enjoins Léonce to adopt a more dominant, less permissive role as a husband: "You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce,' asserted the Colonel. 'Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it'" (68). These narrative details, it's important to notice, are regional touches, meant to

conjure the social world of a distinct place in time. The Colonel's advice to Léonce has a militaristic register, reflecting his army rank and authority. That is, he regards a husband's role in much the same way he regards his stewardship of soldiers during battle, which traditionally involves sternness and force. The regionalism here, then, may evoke the military culture of the Confederacy and its persistence in the larger social discourse of the American South beyond the war.

But the Colonel's marital advice also evokes the sentiment and sound of the "cult of True Womanhood" (Welter 151), a nineteenth century ideological phenomenon. As historian Barbara Welter explains in her seminal 1966 article on this phenomenon, this cultic worldview was propagated in "women's magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century" and had as its centerpiece the idea that "true" womanhood consisted of "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (152). Fundamentally a derivation of both patriarchal and separate spheres ideology, this premodern conception of womanhood is something Welter studied by conducting a "survey of almost all of the women's magazines published for more than three years during the period 1820-60" (151). In light of this survey, her article sought to provide a comprehensive account of the ideology of "true womanhood" during this era, a period that encompasses both Chopin's birth year, 1850, and the last years of the antebellum South. Welter writes that among these four virtues that constituted true womanhood, "[s]ubmission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women" (152, 158). Welter cites a popular text of the period called *The Young Lady's Book* (1830), which further elaborates what is meant by submission: "It is [...] certain, that in

whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her" (qtd. in Welter 159). Or, to give an example bearing more directly upon *The Awakening*'s regional specificity, Welter also discusses briefly Caroline Howard Gilman's *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1838), which offers the following directive for married women: "the three golden threads with which domestic happiness is woven [are] to repress a harsh answer, to confess a fault, and to stop (right or wrong) in the midst of self-defense, in gentle submission" (qtd. in Welter 160). Hese injunctions to self-debasement and submission, as Welter explains, were regarded as guarantors of women's "happiness and power" (152). Women were effectively encouraged to idealize their own subjugation, particularly in marriage; these guidebooks celebrated women's successful adherence to wifely protocols.

Moreover, when the Colonel urges a more forceful "management" of his own daughter, his words have a distinctly patriarchal resonance, but the culture of true womanhood, as rendered in the novel, may be regional as well as ideological. Welter makes clear that this "cult" held a particular sway in southern states and that by the time of the Civil War (1861-1865) suffragist feminism was already gaining influence in northern states, opening pathways for both women's empowerment and a more general progressivism (173-174). Daphne Wyse, another historian of the antebellum South, has also researched the culture of true womanhood during this period. In her study, she finds a significant regional difference with respect to this long-standing, prescriptive normalization of womanhood:

Women in both the northern and southern United States were subjected to the ideals and restrictions created out of the 'cult of True Womanhood' for a time, but, by the mid-nineteenth century, women in the North were beginning to create new identities for themselves, outside of the expectations of the 'cult of True Womanhood,' as a result of increasingly regional specific activities, such as the abolitionist movement, the beginning of urbanization and industrialization, and the closer proximity of northern households and farms to one another. Southern women, specifically elite white women, were tied to the household, referred to as 'hostages' by Welter, and spent copious quantities of time isolated from other women due to the large distances between plantations. As a result, southern society maintained a stricter adherence to the definition of true womanhood. (3)

To the extent that this cult's grip began to weaken in the North while enduring longer in the South, the Colonel's message to Léonce may more reflect a regional persistence of true womanhood culture in southern states than a more expansive, more national phenomenon. That is, reading the Colonel's invocation of authoritarian men and submissive women as part of a ubiquitous patriarchal culture in nineteenth century America is not necessarily untenable, but it doesn't quite account for this regional particularity that Welter and Wyse have observed. Near the end of the century, as Welter explains, "movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, the Civil War—all called forth responses from women which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree" (174). It seems, though, that this call may have elicited a sooner response among women in northeastern states than in the Louisiana of Chopin's novel.

The Colonel's character, while only a fleeting presence in the novel, ultimately evokes a regional particularity, which comes to function as a counter-narrative: against nationalist aspirations towards a unifying cultural and historical identity – that Rooseveltian sense of "being American" – Chopin's novel presents a different image of

postbellum America. Here, historical memory is problematic and provincial rather than being a stable, consolidated foundation for a national pride. This scene with Edna's father stages a collision between Old South nostalgia and modern progressivism. It also, though, occasions a curious tonal shift in the narrative, which hints at Chopin's own attitude toward the antebellum South the Colonel seems to symbolize. Chopin's narrator, with some irony, reveals that, "[the] Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave," and that "Mr. Pontellier had a vague suspicion of it which he thought needless to mention at that late day" (68). These details subtly mock the Colonel's unfitness to offer marital advice. His own behavior in his marriage effectively killed his wife, and Léonce is afraid to bring up this fact. Léonce's choice at this moment – to be passive rather than confrontational – bespeaks a social practice of condoning men's abusive behaviors in marriage. But this narrative aside that underscores the Colonel's ignorance and criminality, even as Léonce sweeps them under the rug, may be read as a critique of this practice, as well as others normalized by true womanhood culture. The Colonel's representation, moreover, is generally derisive, almost satirical. Even Chopin's choice to refer to him simply as "The Colonel" feels ironic; the use of his military title, in place of an actual name, is a disingenuous gesture. The title bestows honorable recognition, but it also ridicules the character, reducing him to a thin caricature of Old South masculinity. His regional particularity, as an old-world patriarch and slaveowner, not only enhances the realism in his character but also invites a more critical attention to the tragic history he evokes. In this way, regionalism is brought into the service of social critique; Chopin's representation of the Colonel—and to a lesser extent,

Léonce—ridicules a defeated culture. The Colonel and Léonce are indeed drawn as regional figures, associated with the antebellum South, but again, their depiction is more mocking than wistful.

## Regional medicine

Another example of this form of critique occurs when Léonce pays a visit to the family physician, Doctor Mandelet. Similarly to how the Colonel's arrival in the narrative invokes patriarchal power, Mandelet's arrival invokes what could be called biopower, in the Foucauldian sense, where an institutional/discursive complex becomes an instrument of state power. Here, it is a power over medical and legal discourses, which inform and ultimately codify power relations between a sanctioning entity – perhaps an agency of medical or legal licensure – and its subjects. As a licensed physician, Mandelet has sanctioned expertise that goes beyond simply being consultative: his authority is endorsed, ratified, and ultimately enforced by a sovereign entity wielding institutional and discursive power, presumably a medical board or community of professional peers. It is important to recognize this dimension of Mandelet's narrative function: like the Colonel's symbolic relation to the antebellum South, Mandelet bears symbolic relation to a contemporary discursive regime. Just as Edna is subjected to her father's patriarchal power/authority, she is here subjected to Mandelet's institutional and disciplinary power. Léonce tells Mandelet: "[Edna] doesn't act well. She's odd, she's not like herself. I can't make her out, and I thought perhaps you'd help me" (62). When Mandelet asks him to specify, he says that "[she] lets the housekeeping go to the dickens"

(63), but when the doctor gently demurs – "Well, well; women are not all alike" (63) – Léonce develops his case further:

'I know that; I told you I couldn't explain. Her whole attitude—toward me and everybody and everything—has changed. You know I have a quick temper, but I don't want to quarrel or be rude to a woman, especially my wife; yet I'm driven to it, and feel like ten thousand devils after I've made a fool of myself. She's making it devilishly uncomfortable for me,' he went on nervously. 'She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and—you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table.' (63)

Nonplussed by his wife's shift in attitude and newfound feminist sensibility, Léonce turns to the doctor out of an intuition that he will "understand," and that he can get things back to normal at that breakfast table. The reference to women's rights is followed quickly by Mandelet asking whether Edna has "been associating of late with a circle of pseudointellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings" (63). 15 I would argue that Chopin, with these references to women's interests, is here representing the ideological tensions between a nascent first wave of American feminism and the institutional barriers to selfdetermination represented by Mandelet's medical practice. Mandelet belittles these women's clubs as "pseudo-intellectual" because they augur forms of social change he neither welcomes nor understands, such as women's emergence from the domestic sphere into the public sphere, women's political organization, and women's rising intellectual ambitions. But Mandelet's domineering presence in the narrative, like the Colonel's, is treated ironically. Chopin mocks the doctor's (questionable) high standing among his peers: "The Doctor was a semi-retired physician, resting, as the saying is, upon his laurels. He bore a reputation for wisdom rather than skill—leaving the active practice of medicine to his assistants and younger contemporaries" (62). Chopin's introduction to

the doctor leaves us unconvinced of his current expertise: he no longer practices medicine, his presumed "wisdom" now being his chief contribution to the field. The wisdom/skill binary Chopin creates here may even insinuate a distinction between specious and actual knowledge. Even if this distinction only signifies a theory/praxis binary, coming as it does, at a moment when Chopin is clearly mocking the doctor's presumed institutional power, the binary feels more intended to express an earnest skepticism towards the doctor's reputation.

In ridiculing Mandelet in this way, Chopin further develops her narrative strategy of using regional particularity—here, a semi-retired Creole doctor/oracle in postwar New Orleans—to demonstrate tensions between the local and the national. But to which side of this binary does Mandelet belong? Is Chopin's characterization of the doctor meant to represent an *au courant* medical practitioner of 1890s America and Europe, or could it be possible that this "semi-retired physician [...] resting upon his laurels" (62) gives medical advice that is somehow outdated, somehow out of step with contemporary developments in the profession? In surveying the medical literature of the late Victorian or *fin de siècle* period, we discover that this question is not as obvious as it may seem. For while a common perception of nineteenth century medical treatment in the U.S. is that it was simply primitive, even barbaric, this doesn't quite tell the whole story. To be clear, it is undeniable that during the first half of the nineteenth century conventional medicine entailed some truly inscrutable, draconian practices, as cultural historian Ann Douglas Wood explains in a 1973 article on women's health care in the U.S. during this period:

Before the Civil War the American doctor was quite simply ignorant, and even his post-Civil War successor did not receive the training expected of a doctor today.

Few medical schools before 1860 required more than two years of attendance; almost none provided clinical experience for their fledgling physicians. Furthermore, gynecology at this period was perhaps the weakest link in the already weak armor of the nineteenth-century doctor's medical knowledge. (32)

I would suggest that this account of gynecology as a weak link in most doctors' medical training is reflected in Mandelet's remark to Léonce that "when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with [women's] idiosyncrasies the result is bungling" (62). What is important to recognize, though, is that Chopin's novel is set in the 1890s, nearly half a century beyond the historical moment Wood describes. It is in this sense that our reading of Mandelet's pronouncements becomes more vexed, more debatable. If we take Chopin's characterization as a generalized representation of contemporary medicine, Mandelet becomes less a regional figure than simply an emblem of the medical profession during this period. If, however, we take into account that by the turn of the century the culture of women's health care within much of the U.S. had undergone significant changes, the claim that Mandelet represents *fin de siècle* medical convention becomes problematic. It is this latter possibility with Mandelet that I would like to further explore here.

The closer we look at the medical treatment of women – and indeed the emergence of gynecology as a field of medicine – the more it appears that Mandelet can be read as a regional figure, a physician whose understanding of women is less typical of an entire nation at this period than of a particular corner of the nation. In order to get a better sense of this period and set up my reading of Mandelet, it is important to provide at least a brief overview of the period's key players and developments with respect to women's medicine. During the 1890s, Silas Weir Mitchell remained a massive figure in

this field. He of course pioneered the "rest cure," a treatment once prescribed for a number of women's ailments but particularly mood disorders. Mitchell's influence during this period is difficult to overstate, as Wood explains: "Mitchell's claims to have cured menstrual disorders and every kind of 'nervous' ailment met with widespread acceptance. He was the best known and most successful woman's doctor of his generation" (32). Without getting into the many absurd, unscientific premises that underlie Mitchell's work, I only want to emphasize that he attained a position of great distinction within his field and that he was certainly not the only prominent physician advocating specious remedies for women's ailments during the later decades of the nineteenth century. Many prescribed what was called "local treatment," which could mean any number of bizarre manipulations of a woman's uterus, including manual investigation, "leeching," "injections," and "cauterization" (Wood, 29-30). And whereas one might reasonably assume that this treatment was prescribed just for uterine ailments, it was quite the contrary. For instance, William P. Dewees, in A Treatise on the Diseases of Females (1863), and James Henry Bennet, in A Practical Treatise on Inflammation of the Uterus (1864), both promoted local treatment for backache, irritability, and cantankerousness (Dewees 17; Bennet 237). This culture, moreover, of women's health care could be characterized as feckless and dangerous, if not immoral. But well before the turn of the century, this culture was beginning to draw widespread criticism and concern, and by the time *The Awakening* was written, the age of Mitchell was in decline.

While giving a full account of this decline is not my intention here, we can certainly get a decent sense of the broad changes well underway by the 1890s, with

respect to women's medicine, by examining some of the most notable areas of progress. First and foremost, as early as the midcentury, women had started receiving admission to medical schools. 16 Of course, the very presence of female physicians within maledominated communities of American medical doctors is not what effected changes in female patients' treatment. It was, rather, the steady emergence of a new consensus within the profession whereby several prominent physicians, both male and female, began expressing solemn misgivings about conventional gynecological practices, particularly local treatment.<sup>17</sup> For instance, J. Marion Sims (1813-1883), who is often referred to as the "father of gynecology" (Ojanuga 28), "frequently lamented the frightening ignorance which seemed especially to attend doctors on the subject of women's ailments" (Wood 32). Among female physicians, Rachel Brooks Gleason (1820-1905), head of the Gleason Sanitarium in New York, and Harriet Hunt, a hometrained Boston physician twice denied admission to Harvard Medical School, both contributed to gynecology's emergence as a medical specialization. Hunt was also a selfproclaimed feminist and suffragist, as she recounts in her memoir Glances and Glimpses (Hunt 340). Naturally, feminist activism and writing contributed to these changes in thinking about conventional treatment in women's medicine.

Scarcely little research on *The Awakening* has examined the novel in relation to this social history of women's medicine at the turn of the century. Typically, though, scholarship touching on this topic tends to invoke a facile impression of this history, by which Mandelet is regarded as a sort of mouthpiece for an entire profession. For instance, in Tara K. Parmiter's 2006 article "Taking the Waters: The Summer Place and

Women's Health in *The Awakening*," she writes that from Mandelet's "late-nineteenth century patriarchal perspective, Edna's 'symptoms' [...] align her with the large group of women diagnosed with hysteria, perhaps the most prevalent mental disorder of the period, which was considered at that time to be a 'peculiarly female' disease 'indicating an immature personality" (11). While there is no doubt that hysteria and its feminization were prevalent in the way Parmiter explains, I would question her statement in two ways. First, the notion there can be a single medical "perspective" attributable to an entire class of professionals in this period, given what I have examined above, is simply erroneous. And secondly, the notion that Mandelet's perspective is representative of the majority in his field is equally so. Parmiter's reading of Mandelet, like much of the novel's criticism focused in some way upon its representation of women's medical treatment, sidesteps the question of the character's possible regionalism, instead treating the doctor as a virtual metonym for his profession. 19 I want to suggest, alternately, that Mandelet is indeed a regional figure, insofar as Chopin has this character say things that more reflect the medical protocols of a particular American community than those of American medicine of the 1890s more generally. Given the many ways that New Orleans and much of Louisiana were slower to modernize – particularly in terms of social progress with respect to gender and race – it is altogether fitting that the novel would feature a physician whose competence in treating female patients is provincial or behind the times.

Even though Mandelet only appears in two chapters, a close reading of these sections lends support to the above claim. When Léonce visits the doctor at his home,

Chopin includes the detail that Mandelet lives in a "house [that] stood rather far back from the street" (62), suggesting figuratively that he exists at a remove from this thoroughfare; that is, he is situated away from the main flow of people, ideas, technology, even modernity itself. Chopin also describes Mandelet's personal appearance in terms that signify a hoary laxity or neglect: "[The doctor] was quite portly, with a profusion of gray hair, and small blue eyes which age had robbed of much of their brightness" (62). As the scene proceeds, we realize something else: that these two men are having a conversation about an absent wife/patient. Presumably this sort of practice, where a husband acts as a steward over the personal affairs of his wife, would be a feature of coverture law in 1890s New Orleans. Still, since Chopin treats Mandelet with some derision, I would argue that this meeting between Edna's husband and male doctor works in concert with the novel's use of regionalism as an instrument of critique. As the two begin chatting, Léonce is "whirling his stick between his two hands" (62). Chopin has him wield a phallic object as he carries out this transactional visit with the doctor, as if to symbolize his intention to retain control over his wife. And as Mandelet presses him for a greater elaboration of Edna's condition, Léonce's leading piece of evidence for his wife's "odd[ness]" is her dereliction of domestic labor: "[she] lets the housekeeping go to the dickens" (62-3). This is where the doctor responds by asking whether Edna has been involved with any women's groups, the implied logic here being, as Partimer puts it, that "feminist ideas [may] have infected Edna's mind" (11). Neither Mandelet nor Léonce can conceive of a reason for Edna's newfound independence, so they effectively try to

"invalidate it as madness" (Partimer 11).<sup>20</sup> Only a few chapters earlier, Léonce even wonders to himself whether Edna is "not growing a little unbalanced mentally" (55).

Once Léonce has made it clear that Edna is not "associating [...] with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women" (63), Mandelet's next move is to inquire of her genetic history: "Nothing hereditary?" he asked, seriously. 'Nothing peculiar about her family antecedents, is there?" (63). Chopin adds that "seriously" here to convey the question's earnest tone, but I would suggest that it also conveys a mocking incredulity: did this doctor *seriously* just propose biological determinism as an explanation for Edna's behavior? Again, it isn't that such an explanation would be out of place in this context, especially given the emergence of eugenics as a popular subfield of biology during the period; rather, it is the accumulation of Mandelet's comments which, in light of the contemporary texts and historical records examined above, comes across as more characteristic of outdated, provincial medical protocols than of the period represented in Chopin's novel.

In the remainder of this scene, Mandelet's regionalized aspect becomes even more prominent. He first advises Léonce to "send [Edna] up to [her sister Janet's] wedding," on the basis that "stay[ing] among her own people for a while [...] will do her good" (63). What's implied in the doctor's advice – advice that Léonce is eager to follow – is that Edna may be actuated to resume normative feminine behavior simply by virtue of contact with this family event. Proximity to her native culture, in other words, is prescribed as a remedy for Edna's lapse in wifely or matronly protocol. This medical guidance is conspicuously unmedical. It is not a "treatment" in the conventional sense of

this term; it is, rather, more of a cultural practice, intended to re-instill a sufficient degree of gendered normativity. After being told that Edna has already refused to attend Janet's wedding, thereby again having his professional insight rendered ineffectual, Mandelet next advises Léonce to allow his wife distance and patience. He also gives a brief declamation on the essence of women:

'Pontellier,' said the Doctor, after a moment's reflection, 'let your wife alone for a while. Don't bother her, and don't let her bother you. Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism—a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. [...] This is some passing fancy of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone. Send her around to see me. (63-64)

This is the novel's longest uninterrupted passage of Mandelet speaking, and it deepens our sense of his regionalism. Putting aside for a moment the fact that there is scant evidence of actual medical direction or expertise, it is additionally noteworthy how closely the doctor's words here resemble an 1867 pamphlet on women's rights written by clergyman John Todd (1800-1873). In her essay "Un-Utterable Longing: The Discourse of Feminine Sexuality in *The Awakening*," Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes this important connection between Todd's pamphlet and Mandelet's advice to Léonce: "When Léonce begins to discern the differences in Edna's manner and takes his concerns to Dr.

Mandelet, their conversation is uncannily similar to [...] nineteenth-century discussions of woman's nature" (14). Wolff then quotes from Todd, whose pamphlet explains that "[in] medical colleges, in medical books, in medical practice, woman is recognized as having a peculiar organization, requiring the most careful and gentle treatment [...] Her bodily powers are not able to endure like those of the other sex" (11). Note the shared

use of "peculiar" between Todd and Chopin's character, the implied idea being that women are essentially queer, even impervious to scientific inquiry. A problem, though, is that Mandelet, in following Todd, is invoking an erstwhile understanding of women, which in turn sustains this erstwhile touchstone of medical knowledge. Even while notions of women as the "gentler" sex persisted well into the twentieth century, the medical profession had by the 1890s adopted a more sophisticated approach to women's health. Deirdre Cooper Owens' recent historical study of women's medicine *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (2017) makes this clear, particularly in her first chapter, which explains how women's health care in southern states actually began to modernize earlier than in the north.<sup>21</sup>

What I would like to suggest, moreover, is that these various historical narratives, records and studies make it all but impossible to regard Mandelet as representative of an expansive culture of American medicine during the period. Rather than have this character speak in a way that reflects a contemporary, profession-wide understanding of women's health, Chopin instead has him say things that are more typical of both an earlier generation of medicine and an insular community of doctors. Mandelet's function is to deepen and complicate the novel's regionalism, in the sense that his brand of outdated medicine is a feature of 1890s New Orleans. Along with the Colonel's prewar nostalgia, Mandelet's superannuated expertise is also a regional element. Chopin will at times treat these regional elements with derision, as she does with Edna's father and doctor, so that she can engage in ideological critique, be it of patriarchy or medical norms. But the mere presence of these elements in the narrative achieves what Fetterley

and Pryse describe as a signature function of the regionalist genre: "literary regionalism uncovers the ideology of local color and reintroduces an awareness of ideology into discussions of regionalist politics" (6).

### Feminist narrative intervention

It is important to recognize, too, that as a feature of Chopin's regionalism, patriarchal ideology in this period wasn't simply cultural; it was juridical. Coverture laws remained on the books in many American states beyond the Civil War (Hoff 46).<sup>22</sup> In Louisiana, where *The Awakening* is set, a "statute remained in place that gave husbands exclusive control over the disposition of jointly owned property" – as late as the 1980s (Hoff 51). Even as the Married Women Property Acts began to appear in 1839, gradually emancipating married women from legal constraints on their economic and social independence, the cultural practice of coverture persisted in Louisiana and other states due to what Joan Hoff (2007) calls "two legal fictions":

One was the old patriarchal assumption about the inherently inferior or unfit position of women due to their biological make-up and domestic function as child bearers which made them unfit for most public tasks of importance. The other reflected a somewhat more modern assumption about the inherently superior, or pedestal position, assigned to women because of their moral purity, feminine delicacy, and sense of civil propriety. (44)

Chopin's narrative—particularly its trajectory—has a distinctive rhetoricity; it is driven by a desire to respond to these ideological fictions, which essentialize and belittle women. One example is Edna's separation from her husband. In a sense this is simply a function of the novel's realism, where marital discord needn't eventuate in reconciliation. But there is also a sense in which Edna's actions may be read as a narrative response to a particular teleology; that is, her path from this point forward—relocation to a home not

owned by her husband, extramarital affairs with both Alcée Arobin and Robert, and ultimately suicide—is a repudiation of narrative expectations conditioned by ideology, whether patriarchy, romance, "true womanhood," normative family structure, or some combination thereof. Edna herself recognizes that her actions are subversive and surprising: when she shares with Mlle. Reisz her decision to rent a house of her own and live apart from Léonce, she expects her friend to be "astonished" by the news (76). Edna also refers to her choice as a "caprice" (76); it is simply a whim, unguided by any kind of design or protocol or convention.

By unburdening her protagonist from these impositions, moreover, Chopin resists the narrative teleology invoked by responses to Edna's unusual behaviors throughout the novel: Doctor Mandelet's bewilderment, the Colonel's indignation, and Léonce's anxiety. When he receives Edna's letter informing him of her intention to live elsewhere, Léonce feels anxiety wondering whether his wife's behavior will inflict "incalculable mischief to his business prospects" (90). This narrative turn is registered as unsettling and disruptive; it not only steers Edna away from reconciliation with Léonce but also sets her against telic pressures that constrain women's representation. This is one sense in which *The Awakening* can be read as a feminist narrative intervention, as its trajectory overrides these telic constraints and forges an alternative trajectory for its female protagonist. To give just one further example related to this point, there is a dinner scene where Doctor Mandelet, after hearing of these changes in Edna's behavior, attempts to assuage

[Mandelet] told the old, ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman's love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after

days of fierce unrest. It was one of the many little human documents which had been unfolded to him during his long career as a physician. The story did not seem to impress Edna. She had one of her own to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. (67)

Mandelet's story could be considered an instance of *mise en abyme*, a French term that literally means "placed into abyss," but which is used in narrative theory to refer to a story within a story. Writing about the history of this term, Stuart Whatling explains that "what mattered was not the mere presence of an embedded [...] narrative within a larger whole but the fact that the thing thus contained resembled that which contained it - and more importantly that this resemblance in some way informed the viewer or reader about the form or meaning of the whole" (2). To take arguably the most famous example of mise en abyme from literature—Hamlet—the play contains within it a scene with a performance of another play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, whose plot bears resemblance to the larger narrative and is meant to elicit an incriminating response from King Claudius. While Mandelet's brief anecdote at dinner may be less consequential dramatically than The Murder of Gonzago, I would suggest that it indeed resembles The Awakening's larger narrative. In both, a married woman restlessly seeks pleasures away from her husband; only the Doctor's story, though, ends with the woman returning to her husband, described as her "legitimate" source of love. His story is convivial fare, meant to please the dinner hosts and guests, but Edna takes issue with the story's ending. She promptly relates a similar one, only her protagonist remains apart from her husband, ultimately paddling off with a new lover.

In this scene, then, we have what I would suggest are competing narratives, one that invokes the teleology described above and another that playfully repudiates it. I call

it playful because we quickly learn that Edna's story, as well as her account of first having heard it, are "pure invention" (67), mocking both Mandelet's presumption of narrative authority and the quixotic sentiment roused by his anecdote. Unsettled by Edna's story, which he takes as an insinuation of her actual intentions, the Doctor soon quits the dinner party, feeling some regret: "He was sorry he had accepted Pontellier's invitation. He was growing old, and beginning to need rest and an imperturbed spirit. He did not want the secrets of other lives thrust upon him" (68). Edna's confession-quaanecdote bothers the Doctor; he even prays on his walk home that "it isn't Arobin" who has inspired Edna's thoughts of this moonlit pirogue tryst, as though the local lothario's charms are vaguely threatening (68). The two stories told at dinner, moreover, bring out a tension that subtends the novel's larger narrative arc: between women's consignment to an idealized feminine role and women's discharging of that role. Like Edna, Chopin envisions a narrative outcome unencumbered by ideological presupposition, where a woman's self-determination remains inalienable. In this way, the novel can be read more generally as a feminist narrative intervention: its protagonist awakens to a more enlightened apprehension of her place in the world and begins to reject social expectations produced by "true womanhood" culture. Even early in the novel, a "certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within [Edna]," and she "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being" (14). As this new light within her brightens, Edna begins to recognize more directly how her position is constrained by an ideology prevalent in her social space.

That is, because the novel's chronotope—its narrative concretization of a particular time and space—is in many ways reflective of an antebellum, premodern South, it entails various manifestations of a patriarchal worldview. In representing this region—its history, culture, politics—Chopin conjures a vast and complex social apparatus. Part of this apparatus, as we discover almost immediately in the novel, is a rather pronounced, rigidified conception of gender. Femininity and motherhood, for instance, are repeatedly presented in essentialist terms: the narrator at one point asks, albeit ironically, "[if] it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (7). Chopin quickly establishes normative gender as a component of the novel's regionalism, initially as a touch of social realism but more generally as social critique as the narrative develops. The most prominent example of this is the novel's idea of "mother-women," defined as women "who [...] esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (9). Chopin's likening of mother-women to volant angels has a vague morbidity, as angels are also posthumous entities. In a later chapter, Edna even remarks to Robert that the women "about [her] are like some uncanny, half-human beings," adding that "[there] must be spirits abroad tonight" (28). So this association of mother-women with ghostliness occurs more than once, deepening the sense that Edna is somehow haunted or disquieted by this figure's ubiquity in her social space.

The reference to "ministering angels" also seems to evoke or allude to Coventry

Patmore's 1854 poem "The Angel in the House," which aestheticizes and eulogizes

separate sphere ideology, specifically the idea that women are naturally suited to be in the

home, caring for children and managing domestic affairs. This notion of an idealized or "angelic" femininity, I want to suggest, also again evokes narrative teleology. That is, when Chopin refers to a "mother's place" (7) and women who are "ministering angels" (9), there is an attendant or implicit narrative context for these figures. Patmore's poem, for instance, provides just this sort of context. This grandiose narrative poem begins with a simple enough premise: the speaker pays tribute to his wife's devotion to him, while also making it seem that she is his spiritual accessory, her chastity securing his relationship with God:

HE meets, by heavenly chance express,
The destined maid; some hidden hand
Unveils to him that loveliness
Which others cannot understand.
His merits in her presence grow,
To match the promise in her eyes,
And round her happy footsteps blow
The authentic airs of Paradise. (lines 312-319)

While giving a more extensive reading of the poem is not my intention here, this excerpt is representative of Patmore's investment in an idealized female figure. Rhetorically, these lines appeal to an ethics of ordinance or predestination, whereby a vestal woman is "destined" by "heavenly chance" for wifehood. This rhetoric of predestination could also be ascribed to an underlying *telos*: that women somehow bear an inexorable purpose. Indeed, Patmore's poem is built upon the idea that a woman's *raison d'être* is to marry, bear children, and devote herself tirelessly to her husband's happiness.

Patmore's domestic goddess, moreover, greatly resembles Chopin's "mother-woman." But whereas Patmore's earlier romantic text venerates this figure, Chopin's more modern text does something different. Chopin rejects a narrative teleology that

sustains the feminine ideal presented in "The Angel in the House," which is more than simply a mode of femininity: it is closer to being a superstructure of normative gender ideology, which is easy to discern in both Patmore's poem and Chopin's novel. The term "mother-woman" is a signifier for this ideology. Chopin uses it as a sort of rhetorical shorthand or trope, meant to conjure not only a woman's image but the very social structure that reliably produces this identity or role. Throughout *The Awakening*, there is an unmistakable exasperation or even contempt expressed towards this social phenomenon, whereby girls are fashioned into mother-women. Chopin emphasizes Edna's uneasy negotiation of this phenomenon, this balancing of social pressures and natural inclinations, which begins in her childhood: "At a very early period, she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence that conforms, the inward life which questions" (14). This tension between outer and inner, between performed conformity and stirring desires withheld, pervades the narrative. It becomes somewhat of a motif for Chopin, arising in different forms at different moments for Edna. In speaking to Madame Ratignolle, for instance, and recalling her Presbyterian upbringing, Edna reveals that as early as age 12 she felt "driven along by habit," and that she was "just following a misleading impulse without question" (17). Later, we learn that Edna feels "a sort of relief" while away from her own children, as "[it] seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (19). In mapping out her protagonist's backstory, Chopin continues to develop this tension between normative pressures in Edna's social space and a more pronounced opposition to those pressures.

Narratively speaking, these are teleological pressures. They serve to keep Edna moving towards a known destination, an eventual moment in the narrative where an ultimate purpose or end – a telos – will have been realized. In this way, Chopin explores the implications of having a character gradually arrest teleological propulsion, this narrative tendency towards a likely outcome. She questions what Eugene Goodheart, in an essay on teleology and narrative, describes as "the ineluctable way in which a sequence of events moves toward some foreordained conclusion" (82). While narratologists have proffered varying theorizations of this ineluctability, one that is especially useful for theorizing *The Awakening*'s relation to narrative teleology is Frederic Jameson's theory of the ideologeme, outlined in his monumental 1981 book *The* Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. The closest Jameson comes to a straightforward, serviceable definition of the ideologeme appears in his first chapter, "On Interpretation": "Within this new [semantic/interpretive] horizon, then, our object of study will prove to be the *ideologeme*, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes" (76). The context for this statement is Jameson's attempt to frame and articulate his larger ambitions with the project: to present a contemporary Marxist interpretive model grounded in "three concentric frameworks," the political, the social, and the historical (75). While the many intricacies of Jameson's model do not concern us here, it will be helpful to examine just a few more areas of his text that bear out this interplay among narrative, teleology and ideology, which I regard as the three essential elements of an ideologeme. He writes,

[the] ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristics may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a

pseudo-idea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes in opposition. This duality means that the basic requirement for the full description of the ideologeme is already given in advance: as a construct it must be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation all at once. The ideologeme can of course be elaborated in either of these directions, taking on the finished appearance of a philosophical system on the one hand, or that of a cultural text on the other; but the ideological analysis of these finished cultural products requires us to demonstrate each one as a complex work of transformation on that ultimate raw material which is the ideologeme in question. (87)

An ideologeme is amphibious, it seems, because it manifests doubly, as either a philosophy or a particular narrative. In the case of Chopin's novel, I would suggest that it contains or expresses both. On the one hand, the novel indeed represents the sort of "belief system" Jameson describes above, most prominently in the form of patriarchy. Patriarchy, as an ideology, entails the sort of "abstract value[s]" and "prejudice[s]" that distinguish it from other belief systems. On the other hand, the novel also contains this type of "protonarrative," which can be a vehicle for class-inflected fantasies. Often these narratives serve to reinforce, exonerate, or eroticize existing power relations within a society, such as we see in a novel like George Gissing's The Nether World (1889), which Jameson argues should be read "as testimony about the narrative paradigms that organize middle-class fantasies about Victorian slum life and about 'solutions' that might resolve, manage, or repress evident class anxieties aroused by the existence of an industrial working class and an urban lumpenproletariat" (186). In other words, Gissing's novel allays and defuses class anxieties rather than provoke them further. The novel's implicit reassertion of a seemingly unalterable social structure makes capitalism – its rarely named yet underlying ideology – into a sort of teleology. Even while all its primary

characters experience severe misfortune by the narrative's conclusion, the novel nevertheless leaves its deep ideological roots intact.

Chopin's novel does something different. It casts a critical, questioning gaze towards the ideological elements and fixtures that comprise Edna's social space, thereby stymieing the teleological propulsion described above. Throughout the narrative, there is a knowing, subversive disdain in Edna's words and thoughts. In refusing Léonce's demand to accompany him to bed, Edna reclines on a hammock on their porch and ponders the banality of her marriage: "Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (30). The tension between yielding and resisting in this context brings into view a distinct ideologeme, insofar as Léonce in this scene invokes the deep, normalized ideological base against which Edna struggles. Léonce's indignant response to Edna's refusal to come to bed functions as a sort of patriarchal mandate: "This is more than folly,' he blurted out. 'I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly" (31). Seemingly emboldened by this demeaning command, Edna replies, "Léonce, go to bed [...] I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you'" (31). She effectively issues a command of her own, which establishes further that the operant ideology—and therefore the attendant narrative teleology—in Edna's social space is under examination, if not all out attack. This is what I above refer to as narrative

subversion. The sentiments arising in Edna's thoughts, by the novel's conclusion, amount to a narrative feminism, which is to say a subtle but pointed critique of patriarchal culture. What makes this a *narrative* feminism is its staging of ideologemic conflict: an antagonism between gendered classes set in opposition, between those wielding power and those subjected to it, and between patriarchal teleology and narrative variability. Most of the narrative tensions in the novel arise from this conflict, which I will now trace more extensively.

It is not difficult to locate this ideologemic conflict in the narrative. Chopin's deployment of particular binaries – enclosure/expanse, dullness/brilliance, alienation/identification, chastity/sexual autonomy – enhances its legibility, giving it more prominence in the narrative. During a Sunday worship, Edna notes the "stifling atmosphere of the church," which gives her a "feeling of oppression and drowsiness" (34). As a symbol of institutional power, the church is here aligned with a deeper, more expansive social apparatus. While this "stifling" apparatus is never given a specific name, its looming presence in the narrative is detectable in more subtle, indirect ways. While Edna lingers on the front veranda one morning, as Léonce goes off to work, she gazes at her social space with a sense of despair: "She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (51). The object or source of Edna's despair grows clearer shortly afterward, as she heads home after dinner with the Ratignolles:

Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It

was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, — a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment. (54)

These two moments – one where Edna feels alienated from her surroundings, the other where she feels only pity for Adele's attainment of this domestic ideal – are further clues perhaps that Edna's most basic conflict is with an ideology that guarantees the very hindrances that beset her. While these hindrances are at times material – the arrangement and management of domestic space, for instance – they are elsewhere more ideational or conceptual, such as in the idea/concept of a normative femininity. At one point, Léonce notes Edna's "absolute disregard for her duties as a wife," which "angered him" (55). Later, after Edna has spent a week with her children in Iberville, it is insinuated that her motherly desire is not as strong as her emerging desire for greater autonomy and perhaps solitude:

It was with a wrench and a pang that Edna left her children. She carried away with her the sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks. All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone. (90)

The penultimate sentence in this excerpt tempers, if not cancels, what comes before. Whereas we initially feel Edna's tenderness towards her children, we are left questioning its durability, and more cynically, even its sincerity. Are we to read this "wrench" and "pang" as arising from Edna's newly awakened, more self-affirming sensibility? Or are these sentiments a residual effect, a well-ingrained reflex arising from her utter absorption of the instincts and habits of a normative role? Near the end of the novel,

when Edna visits the Ratignolles as Adele is about to give birth, she ponders the dim, unpleasant memories of her own children being born:

Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague sense of dread. Her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half-remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a new life to which she had been given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go. (104)

The diction here is particularly suggestive. Edna's memories of childbirth are rendered as unpleasant somatic and sensory textures: uneasiness, pain, malodor, numbness. This sight of her friend in labor, moments away from delivery, elicits a strange anxiety for Edna. It is a conspicuously unromantic recollection, devoid of the familiar notes of elation and transcendence that tend to adorn narrativizations of childbirth, replaced instead with dismay and cynicism. Edna's memory of bringing new life into the world is tinged with deadness, and the singularity of her new child's life is disavowed: her baby is simply one of that "great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go."

What these examples show, moreover, is that the novel's ideologemic conflict largely consists in Edna being pitted against a patriarchal teleology, where there is a normative trajectory for women's lives, and often for the narrativization of those lives. This teleology, expressed as a finite range of narrative possibilities, is a function or derivation of history, which is just to say that narrative form both contains and responds to chronotopic pressures generated by a historical locus. In this sense, Edna's conflict can be read as a conflict with narrative form itself, insofar as we grant that there is indeed an "ideology of form," as Jameson explains here:

When finally, even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativized perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole, and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation, and must be read in terms of what I will call the *ideology of form*, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production. (76)

Since the social formation represented in Chopin's novel tends so pointedly toward a distinct, historical mode of production, it is worthwhile to consider how the novel *engages* with that mode of production. To what extent, that is, does the novel forge a path for new modes of production to emerge? Does Edna's death signify patriarchy's ineluctability? Or can we read her death as a final repudiation of patriarchal teleology? One reason I tend towards the latter is because Chopin's novel opens fissures in this ideology of form. The conclusion, in particular, can be read as one such fissure: as an end point in the narrative, Edna's death is an unanswered, unanswerable question, a sort of gap. The inconclusive ambiguity of her suicide is a narrative space that remains open, fillable only with our interpretive conjecture.

# Emancipatory emplotment

The suicide also has a special significance with respect to the main argument in this chapter. Because Chopin's narrative can be read in terms of the ideologemic conflict described above – this irreconcilability of patriarchal teleology and female autonomy – it is important to consider where and how it concludes, which I would suggest are important elements of its narrative rhetoricity. This is in part because the ending may function to resolve or sustain the conflict. Does the conclusion, in other words, envision a narrative outcome where teleological pressures are somehow thwarted, overcome by

competing interests or possibilities? Which teleological pressures carry forth Chopin's narrative to its endpoint, and how does her choice of ending respond to those pressures? Since the pressures are both ideological and genre-driven, insofar as the logics of patriarchy and regionalism inform/condition this narrative, we might ask whether this narrative outcome accords with or deflects these pressures. I would suggest that the suicide is a logical, albeit obviously tragic outcome: it is the culmination of Edna's turning away from a life unalterably tethered to a social structure inimical to women's interests. The novel, then, powerfully deflects a patriarchal telos necessitating Edna's social reintegration while at the same time yielding to other, genre-driven pressures to leverage its regionalism for social critique. The suicide – as both a thematic and structural end – can be read as a form of narrative feminism, which is to say that Chopin's choice to have the novel end in this way is a rhetorical act; it is a type of argument. Clearly, the arrangement of a narrative—sequentially, logically, temporally can be expressive of ideas and positions every bit as much as dialogue can, which is why it is intriguing to ask the above questions of this novel's poignant and abrupt ending.

In getting into these questions of narrative ordering and logics, it is useful to ground the discussion in a more precise definition of emplotment, drawn from narratology. Emplotment, as Robert Berkhofer explains in *Beyond the Great Story:*History as Text and Discourse, is that which "transforms or configures a multiplicity of events, characters, and conditions into a narrative, and narrativity constitutes its form of understanding chiefly through emplotment broadly conceived" (118). Emplotment, then, is part of a narrative's *syuzhet*, its composition; it is the strategic arrangement or

manipulation of events within a narrative. While modern narrative theorists have used this concept to theorize structuring patterns in folklore, fairy tales, and fables, its oldest known use traces to Aristotle's Poetics, where the term muthos is used to describe the organizing of imitative actions and events (or, *mimesis*) into a coherent system, or plot. Muthos gives a name to the very act of plotting, which of course involves a series of decisions on the part of the storyteller. A storyteller's agency, then, is inscribed in their narrative, which is only to say that narratives are reflective of *choices*, however subtle or concealed they may seem. Modern studies of *muthos*/emplotment have evolved from this elemental, formalist Aristotelian theory of plotting to a theory that considers the extrinsic pressures and factors that engender plot. How, for instance, might emplotment—its distinctive use of sequentiality, linearity, and/or temporality—be expressive of the writer's sociohistorical milieu? Is the very arrangement of a narrative a sort of superstructural phenomenon, evincing the presence of a deeper structuring mechanism? These are among the questions at the intersection of narratology and feminism, which is where I want to situate my reading of the ending of *The Awakening*.

Long before Edna's fateful swim, the novel engages in what I will call narrative citationality, where a narrative trope or convention is cited in a way that conjures a teleology.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Robert's function in the narrative, while not entirely knowable early in the novel, is largely to facilitate Edna's awakening. The effect of his presence on her is saliently eroticized: "[Robert] seated himself again and rolled a cigarette, which he smoked in silence. Neither did Mrs. Pontellier speak. No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt

throbbings of desire" (30). Edna's emerging disenchantment with her domestic circumstance is softened by this dalliance with Robert. She is also visibly devastated by his sudden decision to visit Mexico, deepening our sense of romantic tensions stirring between them: "Edna bit her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and to hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which was troubling—tearing—her. Her eyes were brimming with tears" (44). In these ways, the novel clearly romanticizes their relationship; or narratologically, we could say the narrative cites romantic tropes that function as a sort of code between text and reader. Even as Chopin establishes a conspicuously *unromantic* situation for her protagonist—Edna's "accidental" marriage to Léonce (18), her resolve to inhabit "the world of reality" (19), and her general ambivalence about motherhood and wifehood—the dynamic between Edna and Robert gestures at least at the *possibility* of romance, which would entail an untragic narrative outcome. The actual outcome, though, is not only different but indeed the very essence of tragedy.

As a form of emplotment, the suicide expresses a particular attitude. Its tragedy skewers any lingering expectation of romance, thereby rejecting romance as a both a theme and narrative form. Structurally, as explained above, it also deflects telic pressures to resolve Edna's alienation and perhaps reintegrate her socially. If *The Awakening* can be read as a feminist narrative, as I claim throughout this chapter, this deflection is an important part of the argument: the emplotment of Chopin's narrative not only deflects these pressures but reconfigures them. The suicide can be read, that is, as the expression of *different* pressures, if the ending is seen as Edna's triumph rather than her defeat.

While calling a suicide triumphant is at best objectionable, and at worst morally callous, this hasn't kept critics from pursuing less intuitive readings of the novel's ending. In Deborah Suiter's 2007 study of suicide in fiction by Chopin and Sylvia Plath, she writes

[that] critics [of *The Awakening*] fail to understand the full nature of Edna's awakening, which is nothing short of an awakening to the true circumstances of existence for a woman shorn of the romantic illusions that society foists upon her—an existence in which the deck is so stacked against women that the only true choice left to them is to continue this oppressive existence or to die [...] In the context of Chopin's novel, suicide is not a running away from life but a running to it. It becomes the only choice available to a woman who has placed individual dignity and integrity above all else. (22)

Against my earlier claim that Edna turns away from her life, Suiter wonders here if the suicide isn't instead meant to safeguard her dignity and integrity, provided these were hers to begin with. Could the suicide be understood, in other words, as a sort of existential reclamation, where Edna effectively seizes control of—and therefore may choose to end—her own existence? And wouldn't this interpretation of the suicide support my claim that the novel's emplotment is a repudiation of patriarchal teleology, insofar as the ending is expressive of feminist critique or dissent? John Glendening (2010), another recent critic of the novel, reads the ending similarly, giving an account of Edna's suicide that makes more intelligible its teleological, psychological and social implications:

An entanglement of factors in which both chance and determinism, reflecting the maladaptation, death, and extinction that accompany natural and sexual selection, unite with obstructive familial and cultural influences to mark Edna's attitudes and behaviors, stifle her psychological development, and ultimately take her life. (41)

While I would quibble with Glendening's subtle disavowal of Edna's agency—here, the suicide is attributed to "factors" and "influences" rather than to Edna herself—his reading

is nonetheless productive as it further establishes the relationship between social and narrative pressures. That is, in asking precisely *how* Chopin's novel explores the dynamic between historical pressures upon women and teleological pressures upon narrative form, Glendening's essay concludes that the narrative resolves this vexed dynamic by giving Edna a path to freedom: "Death enters the picture because it represents the ultimate freedom, the only escape from the struggles of a human existence that includes awareness of mortality and the self-awareness that makes death fearful but sometimes alluring as well, especially in circumstances of unmanageable anxiety or disillusionment" (47). Whereas Suiter calls the suicide "not a running away from life but a running to it" (22), Glendening regards it here as "the ultimate freedom." Both readings, though, regard the suicide as dignified, enlightened, and indeed, triumphant.

This paradoxical idea of suicide as somehow both tragedy and triumph is not as outlandish or fruitless as it may seem. While several works of criticism have worked in this area, arguably the most influential study of suicide in/and literature in modern contexts is a book called *The Savage God* (1971), by esteemed English poet and essayist Al Alvarez. In a passage that speaks quite intimately to Edna's situation, Alvarez writes that

[suicide] is, after all, the result of a choice. However impulsive the action and confused the motives, at the moment when a man finally decides to take his own life he achieves a certain temporary clarity. Suicide may be a declaration of bankruptcy which passes judgment on a life as one long history of failures. But it is a history which also amounts at least to this one decision which, by its very finality, is not wholly a failure. Some kind of minimal freedom – the freedom to die in one's own way and in one's own time – has been salvaged from the wreck of all those unwanted necessities. (106-7)

Leaving aside here the gender problem in these lines—Alvarez's odd switch, within a single line of thought, from universalizing "man" to using the ungendered "one"—this account of suicide sharpens the interpretive context within which I have tried to situate the novel's ending. Alvarez here emphasizes the agency and autonomy that are preconditions for suicide. So even if Edna is impulsive or confused, to use Alvarez's language, she is nevertheless in a position of judgment, capable of decisive action. We see this reflected as well in the language Chopin herself employs as the suicide approaches. As Edna walks towards the beach, envisioning how she might proceed, she thinks to herself that "she knew a way to elude them" (108). "Them" is literally a reference to her children, described in this passage as "antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (108), but since it is not actually her children who actively disempower her but rather a social system that relegates women to a finite range of roles and occupations, I would suggest that "antagonists" is a thinly veiled metaphor for oppositional elements in Edna's social space. Edna's knowingness here evinces deliberation and intention. Her suicide is an existential reclamation, an ultimate aspiration to regain control, representing finally - to borrow Alvarez's words once more - "freedom to die in one's own way and in one's own time" (107).

I read the suicide, moreover, as a narrative event that contributes to the novel's more general critique of oppressive social structures. Chopin stages a series of patriarchal crises—Edna's emerging defiance of her husband, her infidelity, her alienation from motherhood, and ultimately her choice of death over patriarchal

womanhood—and refuses to resolve these crises in ways that legitimate a particular ideology. This strategy is in line with Jameson's account of narrative subversion: "Normally, a ruling class ideology will explore various strategies of the *legitimation* of its own power position, while an oppositional culture or ideology will, often in covert and disguised strategies, seek to contest and to undermine the dominant 'value system'" (84). The novel de-legitimates a ruling class ideology that decides in advance both how a woman like Edna ought to behave and how a story about her might be told.

Coda: On Narrative Empathy

Ultimately, *The Awakening*'s suggestive engagement with race, its multifaceted regionalism, and its narrative rhetoricity create an empathic relation with the reader. By this I mean that these features of the narrative elicit deeper compassion for the pervasive curtailments of freedom, mainly on the basis of race and gender, in the postbellum American South. In this way, *The Awakening* pairs well with a newly emergent subfield of narrative theory—intersectional narratology—which, as Suzanne Keen explains, "enables discussion of the complexities of narrative form, contexts of creation and reception, and identity that work together to provoke diverse responses to narrative, among divergent readers of a wide variety of texts" (125). This chapter, like this recent turn in narratology, is born of an interest in the mechanics of narrative provocation, or rhetoric. In calling *The Awakening* an emancipatory narrative, I am suggesting a description of its tendency to provoke a particular empathy for the marginalized or disempowered. Insofar as its images of black despair, its representations of cramped social space, and its recharting of narrative trajectory induce our compassion, the novel

can indeed be regarded as an instrument of both feminist and antiracist intervention. As one of the main points of support for this dissertation's thesis—that narrative disruptions and deconstructions are inherently rhetorical and may be expressive of feminist critique—*The Awakening* is, finally, a text that rejects both patriarchal teleology and normalized racism in the postbellum south.

# **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Arnavon 168-188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Eble 261-269.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ziff 297-305.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 16-27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Anna Shannon Elfenbein's article "Reckoning with Race in *The Awakening*" (2009) gives an account of this scarcity in postbellum literature of or about the Deep South.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Gilbert's article "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire" (1983) places Edna among the many New Woman characters to appear in the 1890s, when the masculinized literary tradition of England and the United States was undergoing significant change: "To be a woman of the nineties meant to have come of age in a new kind of literary era, one whose spirit was, if not dominated by literary women, at least shared and shaped by female imaginations" (45). Like other critics of Chopin's novel from the 1970s and early 1980s, though, Gilbert here largely sidesteps the question of *which* women get to participate in this emergent literary feminism at the end of the century.

<sup>7</sup> hooks (1984).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Morrison's book is referenced in several of the articles on *The Awakening* published that decade, including Lundie (1994), Birnbaum (1995), Gunning (1995), Thomas (1997), and Ewell (1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The Data Center published a report in 2018 called "The New Orleans Prosperity Index," which contains historical population demographic data from 1721 to the present.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Cobley, Paul. "Narratology." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, Web.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>I call Chopin's feminism a "proto-feminism" because the political movement/philosophy now called feminism was rarely called that in the early 1890s. Chopin herself did not use this word in her published writing, nor did she self-identify as a feminist or even as a suffragist (Seversted 134).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Roosevelt was fond of addressing the topic of American literary culture in his personal letters. In an 1894 letter, for instance, written to his good friend James Brander Matthews, Roosevelt stresses the need for artistic independence from Europe: "We must strike out for ourselves; we must work according to our own ideas, and must free ourselves from the shackles of conventionality, before we can do anything" (*Letters*). One paragraph later, he speaks unflatteringly of *The Yellow Book*, a popular British literary journal of the 1890s: "By the way, have you seen that London Yellow Book? I think it represents the last stage of degradation." Here and elsewhere in Roosevelt's letters he wages what Oliver has called "American cultural imperialism" (94).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The Young Lady's Book. Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Babcock, 1830.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Recollections of a Southern Matron. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> During the Progressive Era in the United States, spanning from the 1890s into the 1920s, women's clubs came into prominence. Robyn Muncy explains in her study of the period, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform*, 1890-1935, that these clubs served as sites of education, political activism, and

socialization. Muncy also details how the club movement was denigrated by male intellectuals of the period (97), which Chopin represents here with Mandelet's admonition to Léonce.

<sup>16</sup> Technically, Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D., (1821-1910) was the first woman in the United States to be awarded a degree from a school of medicine, though other women like Harriet Hunt (1805-1875), Ann Preston, M.D., (1813-1872) and Rachel Brooks Gleason, M.D. (1820-1905) were all opposed to local treatment and were also instrumental in expanding women's access to medical education (Wood, 40-45). <sup>17</sup> In 1883, gynecologist Howard A. Kelly founded the Kensington Hospital for Women in Philadelphia, where local treatment was no longer in use by the 1890s (Cyr). Kelly eventually started the first gynecology residency program at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, which promoted "long apprenticeship and pathology training rais[ing] the standard of surgery" (Cyr). As for the other prevailing normative treatment for women's ailments during this period - the rest cure - Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their masterful study of nineteenth century women writers *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), provide a rather telling anecdote about Mitchell's own eventual discontinuation of this treatment, in light of reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman's most famous short story "The Yellow Wallpaper": "When [the story] was published [Gilman] sent it to Weir Mitchell, whose strictures has kept her from attempting the pen during her own breakdown, thereby aggravating her illness, and she was delighted to learn, years later, that 'he had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading' her story. 'If that is a fact,' she declared, 'I have not lived in vain." (Gilbert and Gubar, 91-92).

<sup>18</sup> In the sentence cited from Parmiter, she quotes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America" (197), an essay appearing in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (1985).

<sup>19</sup> See John Glendening's "Evolution, Narcissism, and Maladaptation in *The Awakening*" (2010) and Cynthia Griffin Wolff's "Un-Utterable Longing: The Discourse of Feminine Sexuality in *The Awakening*" (1996).

<sup>20</sup> Wood explains in her article that by the turn of the century the prevailing explanation for many of women's mental ailments was increasingly normative femininity itself, with its various restrictions on women's social and economic mobility (30-35).

<sup>21</sup> Owens tells the story of brothers Dr. Henry F. and Dr. Robert Campbell, who practiced in Augusta, Georgia. They not only served as the first editors of the South's first medical journal, *Southern Medical and Surgical Journal*, but also helped to found the American Gynecological Society in 1876 (Owens 18). <sup>22</sup> Across the pond, by the 1890s, British courts had started ruling in favor of married women's rights, even when the ruling ran counter to coverture practices (Stretton and Kesserling 3). So inspired by this emerging legal and social progress for women, prominent British suffragist Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy exclaimed that coverture was "dead and buried," and that marriage was moving towards "the substitution in the relation of husband and wife, of the ethics of justice and equality for the old and worn-out code of master and slave" (Stretton and Kesserling 3).

<sup>23</sup> I'm using citation/citationality in two senses. The first is the sense J.L. Austin lays out in *How to Do Things with* Words (1955); the second is that which Jacques Derrida develops in his essay "Signature Event Context" (1988). Generally speaking, citation is an instance of invoking a discursive code—like a narrative trope—in a way that conjures a particular signifying context. Literary and film genres would be an example of this sort of context, with a discrete set of signifying practices distinguishing it from other genres: romance, realism, science fiction, bildungsroman, etc.

# **Chapter Two**

# Queer Temporalities and Chronotopic Gender in Mrs. Dalloway

Early in her 2005 book In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, Judith Halberstam begins with the fairly straightforward premise that "[q]ueer uses of time develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1). Within these uses of time, the thinking goes, narratives can get beyond, call into question, or reconfigure what Halberstam calls "logics of location, movement, and identification," which could consist of "strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (1). To illustrate, she uses Michael Cunningham's 1998 novel The Hours—both an homage to and reinvention of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway (1925)—as an example of a contemporary text that queers temporality. Cunningham, she writes, "turns Clarissa [Dalloway] away from the seemingly inexorable march of narrative time toward marriage [...] and uses not consummation but the kiss as the gateway to alternative outcomes" (3). The Hours imagines one such alternative outcome for Woolf's protagonist, where Clarissa has chosen Sally as partner, instead of Richard. What if, Cunningham wonders, Clarissa's strong attraction to Sally endured and materialized into something akin to marriage? What if that rapturous kiss, which Clarissa calls the "most exquisite moment of her whole life," had been more than a single moment? (35). Cunningham's novel extends the moment, effecting a temporal intervention, both narratively and historically. But whereas *The Hours* achieves this effect with a conspicuously tripartite narrative structure, alternating among three related but distinct story arcs ("Mrs. Dalloway," "Mrs.

Brown," and "Mrs. Woolf"), the earlier novel that inspired it achieves the same effect, albeit differently and in arguably subtler ways. Rather than setting up episodic partitions, where shifting focalizations of the three co-protagonists are entirely unambiguous—they're even given titles—Woolf relies on free indirect discourse and a single narrative arc, though one that is focalized among many characters.

I call attention to this structural difference between the two novels, moreover, not to set up an aesthetic comparison but rather to underscore that queer time, or the queering of time, can take a variety of forms in literary narratives. While *The Hours* does this by queering Clarissa's history, and also by eschewing the type of narrative linearity associated with andro- or ethno-centric accounts of history, Mrs. Dalloway does this differently. First, it pairs temporal disruptions with instances of social commentary or critique; secondly, it represents time as irreducibly multiform and impervious to mechanistic control; and thirdly, it features characters who are either alienated or haunted by time. Given these functions of the novel, I consider it surprising when Halberstam asserts that Woolf's fiction generally "struggle[s] to encounter and inhabit" the very moments of being that Woolf herself so famously theorizes in her 1939 autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past" (3). Halberstam finds and describes in *The Hours* the very things which, I would offer, are present in Mrs. Dalloway: a "queer rendering of time and space" (2) and an "elegant formulation of queer temporality [that] opens up the possibility of [what the novel calls] a 'rich, riotous future'" (3). So in her brilliant and very useful theorization of queer time – perhaps out of an eagerness to get to Cunningham – Halberstam largely overlooks, or simply chooses not to acknowledge, this

dimension of Woolf's novel: the queering of time. This is the first of two features of the novel that I will focus upon in this chapter.

The second is the novel's feminism, which is really more aptly described as a queer feminism – I'll come back to this point. I want to first acknowledge that in spite of its artful, at times aggressive critique of normative gender, Mrs. Dalloway is rarely introduced as a feminist narrative. It tends instead to be discussed in terms of its representation of postwar malaise and disillusionment in London, its high Modernist aesthetic, and its tensions between a curious "terror" and "ecstasy" that linger above and within the novel's main characters (Woolf 190). These thematic and stylistic concerns have never entirely supplanted feminist criticism of the novel. On the contrary, there have been a number of important essays on Mrs. Dalloway over the past couple generations that address feminist questions, from Margaret Blanchard's brilliant discussion of socialization and gender in the novel (1982) to Alex Zwerdling's essay on London's conservative "social system" (1988), to Lee Edwards's attempt to locate and describe the novel's politics (1990). Still, critics have yet to fully explore the question of how this novel's form relates to its feminism, how its narrative technique – its manipulation of sequence and temporality being just one example – expresses or engages in feminist critique. So with respect to this interpretive concern, we could ask what it would even mean to call Mrs. Dalloway a feminist narrative. Which narrative techniques or styles could be called feminist, and why might it matter? Is there a relation between feminism and temporality that this novel invites us to look at more carefully? In examining its distinctive queering of time, we notice various ways that Woolf

deconstructs and reimagines narrative temporality: these temporal effects often occur in relation to a crisis of enforced or compulsory gender normativity. One aim of this chapter, then, is to read this relation as a key part of the novel's feminist rhetoric, its argument that time itself, in its myriad forms and constructions, is conditioned by sociality. Foregrounding this connection between the novel's representation of a stifling social normativity and Woolf's use of temporal disjunction, I will argue against the prevailing and most enduring readings of the novel that have, somewhat surprisingly, yet to sufficiently describe its temporal effects in relation to its distinctly queer feminism. By queer feminism, I mean to describe a mode of feminism that acknowledges an expansive range of gender and sexual identities, particularly those that complicate and challenge a heteronormative paradigm, which I regard here as a component of the larger social normativity depicted in Woolf's novel. Mrs. Dalloway's Modernist aspirations, as I will show, are inseparable from its politics. Novelistic innovation and technique here have a distinct feminist rhetoric, and I read them in two specific ways in this chapter: first, as a commentary upon the social strictures and anxieties of postwar London, and secondly, as Woolf's own engagement with—and artful evasion of—the oppressive shadow she describes in A Room of One's Own.

Woolf's London chronotope, queer feminism

In fleshing out the context for my reading a bit further, it will help to say a bit more here about the novel's historical realism, its rootedness in and evocation of a particular time and place. This realism is significant because it entails an implied temporal continuity. The hours that fill this day, in other words, continue to pass, even as

Woolf opens spaces in the narrative where memories, introspection or perspectival shifts occur. And it is not simply narrative time that progresses; it is *real* time, so to speak. These hours are given such lush, such intricate sensory textures that they amount to a veritable phenomenological realism, an approximation of, or aspiration to inhabit, a historical consciousness. Even reading the novel nearly a century past its publication, it is remarkable how Woolf effectively negates the distance between our present and June of 1923 in London, giving experiential access to this day. There is a delicate blend of auditory and visual notes: "[One] feels [...] a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense [...] before Big Ben Strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air" (4). There are idyllic descriptions of children amid flower beds: "[Girls] in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer's day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations, its arum lilies [...] it was the moment between six and seven when every flower [...] seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds" (13). There are familiar early twentieth century cityscape tableaux: "Some newspaper placard went up in the air, gallantly, like a kite at first, then paused, swooped, fluttered; and a lady's veil hung. Yellow awnings trembled. The speed of the morning traffic slackened, and single cars rattled carelessly down half-empty streets" (110). There's a gorgeous banality in these descriptions; the otherwise mundane sights – a clock striking, girls picking flowers, a news display, morning traffic – are given exquisite detail, so much so that we can readily occupy these perspectives, even as they shift throughout the narrative.

In this way, Woolf tries to distill a collective consciousness – to render the psychic landscape – of postwar London on a June day in 1923; the social world these characters occupy has a mimetic relation to an actual place. From this interpretive standpoint, then, Mrs. Dalloway raises questions that are at once feminist, narratological, and historical. Temporal disruptions in the novel can be taken to represent or express crises of normative gender, but they also function as diegetic oscillations or shifts that complicate its syuzhet, the term Russian narratology has given to a narrative's strategic presentation and sequencing of perceptible phenomena. And yet we can add to these feminist and narratological understandings of temporality further, concomitant questions that address the novel's historical temporality. This is its intended historical authenticity or verisimilitude, composed of sights and sounds that were perhaps only slightly less real for actual London denizens in June of 1923 than for Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. These concerns about narrative time and space bring to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, which he introduces in his 1937 essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." There, he writes that the chronotope literally, time/space—is what determines "[all] of a novel's abstract elements philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect" (250). This theoretical concept, when applied to the novel's temporal oddities, opens up a new way to understand the intersection of history and narrative in Mrs. Dalloway.

This novel, then, occupies a space at the intersection of queer temporality, narratology, and feminism. I call this novel's feminism a queer feminism because it issues a critique not only of normative gender, as one might expect from a narrative

regarded as feminist, but also of heteronormativity and chronormativity, which have more often been the object of queer theoretical inquiry. Whereas some have tried to theorize an ethical and/or philosophical partition between feminism and queer theory, others question this disciplinary boundary and reject the notion that queer theory's rise somehow indicates that feminist theory's status is in decline. Why can't there be an alliance of these two fields of inquiry – a queer feminism – given the considerable overlap in terms of the questions that often drive both queer and feminist studies? Judith Butler, for instance, has questioned the basis for maintaining an inflexible separation between queer theory and feminism, writing that she "would insist that both feminist and queer studies need to move beyond and against those methodological demands which force separations in the interest of canonization and provisional institutional legitimation" ("Against Proper Objects," 21). Butler sees the separation as arising, in part, from interests that are inimical to the advancement and refinement of both fields of study. She urges us further to "[think] against the institutional separatisms which work effectively to keep thought narrow, sectarian, and self-serving" (21). From an institutional standpoint, then, both queer studies and feminism have a stake in *claiming* their academic territory, so to speak, in establishing whichever disciplinary or departmental boundaries are needed to secure the form of legitimacy Butler is describing. But because of the vital crossdisciplinarity between queer and feminist studies, these institutional concerns may become secondary concerns. Moreover, even if we readily acknowledge, as Butler does, the important epistemological, discursive, and historical distinctions between queer theory and feminist theory, distinctions that are not purely academic, we can say as well

that the two traditions have a similar disposition: they both are engaged in an ongoing critique of power structures that privilege and dignify some while disempowering and maligning others. So queer feminism is more than just a rhetorical construct; it is actually a way to facilitate exchange and collaboration between two fields with mutual, though never quite identical, interests.

Woolf's novel, I would suggest, can be situated at this vexed yet necessary intersection between feminism and queer studies. Mrs. Dalloway is engaged with questions familiar to both fields of inquiry, and a queer feminism allows for a more protean, more nuanced reading of time in Woolf's novel. Whereas recent studies of temporality in Mrs. Dalloway have given wonderful readings of time in the novel, like Jason Wakefield's 2013 essay on existential temporality and Kate Haffey's 2010 essay on queer teleology, we have yet to sufficiently describe or theorize what may be the novel's most provocative argument: that time both constitutes, and is constituted by, narrative. In short, the hours of just a single day are the fabric of narrative. The hours contain and conjure memories that collide with the present, and it is out of these collisions, between then and now, that the self continues to emerge and evolve: Septimus's battle with PTSD and Clarissa's queer melancholia are perhaps the best examples of this. So while Wakefield reads temporality in Heideggerian terms and Haffey reads it as an accumulation of moments strung together along the axis of narrative time and lyric time, my own reading – a queer feminist reading – gives a different account of the novel's discourse on queer time, narrative, history, and the self.

Mrs. Dalloway, moreover, requires this sort of reading because the complex "social system" it depicts, to borrow Zwerdling's phrase again, is a very complex power structure indeed, undergirded by both patriarchal and heteronormative convention. Woolf's novel casts suspicion on this conventionality by treating it as a form of violence, and the thing Woolf chooses as her supreme emblem of conventionality is, of course, time. Time is referenced or conjured throughout Mrs. Dalloway and very commonly in unpleasant or intrusive ways for its characters. There is the "deathly" (49) tolling of Big Ben, and also Clarissa's keen awareness of being "unspeakably aged" (8) by time. There are the "ruins of time" (16) ascribed to British imperialism, and also Septimus's heightening dissociation from time as his doctors try their best to tether him to "Proportion" (97). For Woolf, time is what sustains the social system and codifies its various conventions. It is also, narratologically speaking, the dimension Woolf manipulates and deploys most artfully; temporal disruptions and shifts are occasioned by flights of memory, for instance, getting us ever closer to those luminous moments of being she so covets. These flights, moreover, open up spaces where Woolf can comment on and resist forms of gendered normativity.

# *Modalities of the temporal*

From the earliest moments of this novel, time is referenced or evoked repeatedly and in various ways, establishing a central thematic significance. As Clarissa sets out to buy flowers for her party, she first savors neither the brightness nor sounds but the "fresh[ness]" of the morning, impressed mainly by the sheer newness of this day, or by this particular time of day (3). It reminds Clarissa of her childhood, of the way she would

pass through her home's French doors into the early morning air; it also reminds her of her old friend Peter Walsh, a frequent visitor to Bourton, her family's estate (3). This narrative shift, from Clarissa's present in 1923 to a memory of her earlier self, comes as our first example of a technique that Woolf will employ throughout the novel: an ongoing vacillation between characters' present, moment-to-moment consciousness and memories that come to intrude or bear upon that consciousness. In this way, narrative time becomes layered and multiple, shown to exist in various and competing forms, even as the imperious image of Big Ben anchors the narrative in *real* or material time. These images or evocations of a material, objective time are repeatedly negated, undermined by the novel's stubborn refusal of temporal linearity and sequentiality. So even as the narrative advances sequentially – line by line, page by page – this *narrative* time does not carry forth time in its entirety. Indeed, the novel demonstrates the limitless variety of time as a perceptual phenomenon, and as something composed of durational asynchronicity, where units and forms of time coincide with other, differently shaped units and forms of time but never in an ordered, patterned manner.

For example, as the narrative begins, a first duration is established: it will take some time for Clarissa to leave her home and purchase flowers; Big Ben will strike, hours will expire. Quickly, though, a second, more abstract duration follows: we move into Clarissa's private thoughts and find her rapturously pondering her morning errand: "what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach" [...] "What a lark! What a plunge!" (3). Here, in the third paragraph, a present moment is established, but this "present" is rendered internally, as a succession of fleeting thoughts and associations and memories

for Clarissa. This private or solipsistic duration is temporally contiguous – but not coterminous – with the material time measured by Big Ben. There is still another duration, of memory, which interrupts the immediacy of Clarissa's stream of present sensations, and shifts the narrative to a fond recollection of nearing adulthood:

How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" (3)

This passage is the novel's earliest example of the durational asynchronicity described above, but there is also durational simultaneity here. While the third-person perspective is maintained throughout, there is also perspectival ambiguity here, coupled with this temporal effect. Three durations are at once discernible in these lines: the *present* narration of Clarissa's private thoughts wherein she compares a typical Bourton morning to her current one ("stiller than this of course"); the intervening duration of the actual memory ("How fresh, how calm [...] the air was in the early morning"); and the duration of a more objective narrative time that encompasses the other two ("feeling as she did"). The "she" in this final duration interrupts the narrative's focalization of Clarissa and thus establishes what will become a general stylistic tendency in *Mrs. Dalloway*: a frequent alternation among narrative perspectives as well as durational modes. Perspectival ambiguity is paired with durational ambiguity, thus denying the narrative any sort of normative or abiding epistemological center. We see this as well in the following paragraph as perspective shifts again, this time moving from an interiority – Clarissa's

private thoughts of Bourton and Peter – to an exteriority – a glimpse of Clarissa on the street outside her home, spotted briefly by a neighbor, on her way to buy flowers:

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, bluegreen, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright. (4)

Here, there is less perspectival ambiguity than perspectival multiplicity; that is, we can discern both where the perspectival shifts occur – in the second and last sentences – and that there are three different narrative perspectives, all third-person: (1) a description of Clarissa pausing while the van passes (sentences one and three), (2) a focalization of Scrope Purvis, the neighbor, who thinks of Clarissa's charm and avian features, and (3) a parenthetical aside embedded in the focalization of Purvis, which could either be attributed to the novel's general narrator or to Purvis himself. As in the earlier passage, with Clarissa's Bourton memory, these shifts mediate and thus complicate how the narrative is read; Woolf's perspectival devices, I would add, demonstrate the distinction between *syuzhet* and *fabula*. So even as Clarissa's London morning is rendered in impressive, patient detail, what we can claim to *know* of this place and time is simultaneously undercut by the frequent shifts in perspectival and temporal positioning.

With respect to temporality, these varying durational modes give the novel its narrative texture, or its temporal contour. There are several examples: the passage of *real* time in the hours leading up to Clarissa's party; the digressions away from this real time into personal or meditative time where we follow Peter's or Lucrezia's or Clarissa's present thoughts for a brief or extended interval; or simply the duration of one of these

characters' memories. Another feature of this temporal contour is the narrative's unusual dramatic arc, which can be likened to the title of a novel Woolf wrote six years after this one: *The Waves*. Like a wave, the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* rolls forward and then back, the forward movement advancing the plot in a logical way, the reverse movement temporarily arresting narrative time and receding into a particular character's thoughts. The reverse movement may also recede into an altogether different narrative digression where the third-person narration becomes playful or sardonic, as with the section on "Proportion" and "Conversion" (97). Within these narrative interstices, where time is either suspended or somehow complicated, spaces emerge which Woolf fills with a particular *ressentiment*, a feeling of angst or dread or even despair. For instance, shortly after Clarissa realizes that only Richard has been invited to Lady Bruton's luncheon, she thinks of time as something that reduces her prominence in her social world:

[Clarissa] feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, and felt often as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl. (29-30)

Clarissa attributes this slight to her growing older. Her fear of time is equated here with a fear of losing a part of herself that once "filled the room she entered" and bore the "tones of existence." Something that sustained and emboldened her in her "youthful years" is now weighted with an "exquisite suspense," which keeps her from going forth, or "plunging," with the same ease and vitality she once had. In thinking of her own aging in

this way, as a "dwindling," and in imagining that this is what inspires Lady Bruton's hardened, "impassive" gaze, Clarissa reasons that growing older has come with a social cost, but one that does not exist for her husband. In this way, Woolf locates and comments upon Lady Bruton's implied sexism, which, when considered with the narrative's many other forms of feminist sentiment and insinuation, can be read as a more generalized type of sexism common to Clarissa's social class. Only Clarissa receives Lady Bruton's stone-like gaze, which we are led to assume softens when directed at Richard.

Moreover, it is clear that Woolf uses these subtle yet meaningful narrative effects – temporal disruption, durational variety, and perspectival vacillation – because they achieve for her the sort of formal and stylistic innovation that are the hallmark of her fiction, of her Modernism. I want to argue, though, for a different significance of these effects: namely, that they serve to resist a normativity that is a prominent social backdrop for both Clarissa and for Woolf herself. By reconfiguring narrative time, Woolf creates a form of what Roland Barthes refers to in *S/Z* (1970) as "*un espace dilatoire*" ("dilatory space"), a space where the narrative is temporarily suspended so that meaning can be revealed or tension can be relieved:

The dynamics of the text (since it implies a truth to be deciphered) is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer; whereas the sentences quicken the story's "unfolding" and cannot help but move the story along, the hermeneutic code performs an opposite action: it must set up *delays* (obstacles, stoppages, deviations) in the flow of the discourse; its structure is essentially reactive, since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organized set of stoppages: between question and answer there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named "reticence," the rhetorical figure, which interrupts the sentence, suspends it, turns it aside. (75)

In unpacking this a little, we notice that this "dynamics" Barthes describes can be thought of as motional tensions in the narrative, which can seem paradoxical insofar as the tensions are often between a narrative's linear, progressive movement – its "unfolding" – and its various points of stoppage or delay. Drawing from structural linguistics, Barthes has located a canny analogy between the diachronic unfolding of language itself – as dialogue or as question and answer – and the similarly diachronic unfolding of narrative. We notice as well for Barthes that within this unfolding discursive mode, be it language or narrative, there is necessarily a dilatory space, which serves to interrupt or intervene. This dilatory space, as Peter Brooks further elaborates in *Reading for the Plot: Design* and Intention in Narrative (1984), is the "space of retard, postponement, error, and partial revelation—is the place of transformation: where the problems posed to and by initiatory desire are worked out and worked through" (92). There is no single narrative "initiatory desire" in Mrs. Dalloway but rather a confluence of aspirational, emancipatory energies oriented against the stasis of British society: Elizabeth Dalloway's emerging alienation from her mother and her distaste for traditional femininity; Doris Kilman's religious progressivism and contempt for Clarissa's classism; and Septimus's violent rejection of a medical apparatus that misunderstands his illness.

These forms of conflict, where Woolf sets a character against some element of the London social apparatus, create this sort of dilatory narrative space. Elizabeth's outing with Miss Kilman is one example. This section is significant because it is where Woolf most noticeably establishes a contrast between Elizabeth and her mother. Whereas the rest of her family is "fair-haired" and "blue-eyed," Elizabeth "was dark [and] had

Chinese eyes in a pale face," "an Oriental mystery" (120). Under Miss Kilman's tutelage Elizabeth has also developed a more critical awareness of class difference and stratification, as distinct from Clarissa, who is less reflective on their family's social privilege:

[The Dalloways] lived with everything they wanted, -- [Clarissa] had breakfast in bed every day; Lucy carried it up; and she liked old women because they were Duchesses, and being descended from some Lord. But Miss Kilman said (one of those Tuesday mornings when the lesson was over), "My grandfather kept an oil and colour shop in Kensington." Miss Kilman made one feel so small. (128)

This "smallness" is a sense of humility; it's also an enlightened understanding of and interest in one's place in society. So "small" is ironic here, a play on the primacy of Elizabeth's emotion over her reason, at her tender age of seventeen; she feels humiliated but is developing a social consciousness, perhaps in contrast to the air of entitlement among the social elites at Clarissa's party later that day. Shortly after the above passage, Elizabeth even says that "she did not much like parties," and the entire ensuing scene of this outing, with Elizabeth waiting for and riding the omnibus, emphasizes her sense of freedom and exhilaration, being somewhere else than home (128). Elizabeth thinks to herself that "it was so nice to be out in the air," relishes that "she need not go home just yet," and feels "delighted to be free," adding to this sense that the outing is somehow liberating for her (131-32). She also expresses discomfort with the increasing amount of attention given to her physical appearance, and with being likened to objects and images that afford scopic pleasure:

And already, even as [Elizabeth] stood there, in her very well cut clothes, it was beginning...People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies, and it made her life a burden to her, for she so much preferred being left alone to do what she liked in the country,

but they would compare her to lilies, and she had to go to parties, and London was so dreary compared with being alone in the country with her father and dogs. (131)

Elizabeth's uneasiness – her feeling burdened, perhaps alienated by this feminine role she is being summoned to fill – becomes more layered here, more psychological; she does not identify with this "beginning," as it sets her down a path towards parties she would prefer not to attend and forms of attention she would prefer not to receive. We also see more directly here Clarissa's own role in Elizabeth's debut, as it were. In line with the implied social decorum, she will oversee her daughter's transition from child to debutante:

It was expression [Elizabeth] needed, but her eyes were fine, Chinese, oriental, and as her mother said, with such nice shoulders and holding herself so straight, she was always charming to look at; and lately, in the evening especially, when she was interested, for she never seemed excited, she looked almost beautiful, very stately, very serene. What could she be thinking? Every man fell in love with her, and she was really awfully bored. For it was beginning. Her mother could see that—the compliments were beginning. (132)

Again, this ever more ominous "beginning" looms before Elizabeth. While on the one hand her jaunt aboard the omnibus, "rushing up Whitehall," is generally pleasant, approaching rapturous at times, Woolf interrupts Elizabeth's outing with hints of disquiet, which are given as the narrative abruptly shifts to a focalization of Clarissa (132). It is as though Clarissa's presence—or her gaze— accompanies Elizabeth even as she strives for respite from the burdens she feels at home. We could even say that Clarissa *intrudes* upon the narrative here: the sudden shift in focalization is surprising as it comes amid an extended episode of the novel where Elizabeth is center stage. This narrative technique, the focalized oscillation from daughter to mother, deepens our sense

that the burdens Elizabeth feels are created and maintained by Clarissa. Just as we are made privy to Elizabeth's stirring distaste for this naturalized, class-inflected feminine role, which Clarissa presents to and encourages in her daughter, we notice as well, through Woolf's timely shifts in focalization, how Elizabeth feels psychically enthralled to her mother, how she cannot quite get beyond those "dreary" burdens of home even as she is kindled by her outing with Miss Kilman.

As this narrative interlude ends, and focalization shifts from Clarissa back to Elizabeth, the dilatory space noted above becomes most pronounced. Time markers largely disappear. Our sense of narrative or diegetic time weakens, or is suspended momentarily. There is little or no advancement of plot, in the technical sense, and we instead linger with Elizabeth on her bus ride for what is the most prolonged focalization of this character in the novel. This temporal disruption, then, becomes an occasion for Woolf to question and resist gendered normativity. Whereas earlier episodes of the novel are indeed meant to establish Elizabeth's difference from her mother, here this difference is set within a larger context, more grounded in the social history of postwar London, in particular women's evolving social status. In this passage, for instance, Elizabeth thinks of the direction she could take with her life and career:

[Every] profession is open to the women of your generation, said Miss Kilman. So she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer. Animals are often ill. She might own a thousand acres and have people under her. She would go and see them in their cottages [...] In short, she would like to have a profession. She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament, if she found it necessary [.] (133)

Fittingly, her newfound ambition is attributed to the influence of Miss Kilman, whose class difference, taste in fashion, and Christianity are the source of great exasperation for

Clarissa. Miss Kilman's influence is a rebuttal, so to speak; it stands in opposition to Clarissa's, or at least what we *know* of it. Where Clarissa is concerned mainly with the attention Elizabeth is beginning to receive from men, Miss Kilman has clearly fostered a different concern and interest: choosing a profession. And while this alone—this acknowledgment in the narrative of greater social mobility for some women—does not quite bear the weight of this chapter's main argument, it does begin to demonstrate the relationship between temporality and feminism that I want to underscore. That is, Woolf's manipulation of narrative time coincides with Elizabeth's meditation on the openness of professional fields to women, indeed even the most socially elite fields like medicine and government. Temporal disruption, moreover, opens a space for feminist critique.

Another example of this occurs slightly earlier in the novel, during the most protracted focalization of Miss Kilman. This section of the novel is positioned between two time markers, a first as Clarissa privately thinks of time, enumerating the days the of the week (119), and a subsequent one when Clarissa enjoins Elizabeth and Miss Kilman to be home in time for the party, a reminder of their time-bound schedule (123). In the sequence between these time markers, though, figurations of time again recede to the background, or are withheld. Just as with Elizabeth's ambitious meditation on her career, we again have this dilatory space in the narrative, where advancement of the plot is deferred, and where, as Brooks puts it, "we work through toward what is felt to be [...] the revelation of meaning" (18). Time is suppressed, momentarily denied its imperious administration of the narrative, so that subtexts can emerge, and meanings can be

revealed that may otherwise remain interred. In this case, Woolf uses dilatory space to explore differences among women, across lines of class and nationality in particular. With this shift to a focalization of Miss Kilman, who functions in some ways here as a subaltern female figure, the narrative enlarges and diversifies its representation of female subjectivities.

When Miss Kilman arrives at the Dalloways' home, just before she will accompany Elizabeth to go shopping in the city, we are shown important details about her backstory as well as an explanation for her strong antipathy towards Clarissa. Miss Kilman is German by birth, her family name originally spelled "Kiehlman" but changed due to English anti-German sentiment associated with World War I (120). Her teaching career was also affected by this sentiment, as she lost her position at Miss Dolby's school: "Miss Dolby thought [Miss Kilman] would be happier with people who shared her views about the Germans" (120). Left with no other prospects, Miss Kilman took a position with the Dalloways:

[Miss Kilman] was poor, moreover; degradingly poor. Otherwise she would not be taking jobs from people like the Dalloways; from rich people, who liked to be kind. Mr. Dalloway, to do him justice, had been kind. But Mrs. Dalloway had not. She had been merely condescending. She came from the most worthless of all classes—the rich, with a smattering of culture. They had expensive things everywhere; pictures, carpets, lots of servants. She considered that she had a perfect right to anything that the Dalloways did for her. (120)

Clarissa embodies, for Miss Kilman, a genteel, privileged femininity, a social position she inherited rather than earned. Miss Kilman pities and despises "women like Clarissa" (121); she imagines that there could be a "better state of things," where a new culture or ethics of women's social empowerment might emerge (121). For Miss Kilman,

Clarissa's excess of leisure is something of an affront, a seeming acquiescence to the idea that "fine ladies" are better off "lying on a sofa" than seeking employment (121). So in keeping with the novel's general tendency to pair feminist undertones with temporal variance, this glimpse at Miss Kilman's private thoughts about Clarissa aligns with the many other instances of implied social commentary, where Woolf cunningly unsettles prevailing ideas about gender and class.

To the extent that these prevailing ideas are legible as historically particular, we could also say that they are chronotopic. A novel's chronotope, as noted above, is for Bakhtin a narrative dimension that operates in part as an epistemological context, as a field of meaningful or intelligible referentiality. But the locus for this referentiality – the thing that gives it a certain representational plausibility – is a tacit claim on history; that is, when a narrative is embedded within a context that approximates, however incidentally or intentionally, a distinct epoch, there is often an implicit presumption of historical realism. The context cited or conjured by the narrative makes a demand of us: that we regard it as mimetically sound, or as a faithful rendering. Once this context is effectively installed, the narrative is understood to proceed according to the attendant logics of the context's historically-contingent field of referentiality – that is, its chronotope. I would suggest, moreover, that gendered representation itself entails certain logics of referentiality, and that these logics can be regarded as chronotopic, especially given the novel's unsubtle commentary on their ideological underpinnings. Marianne Cave has explored this dynamic between ideology and narrative representation in her essay "Bakhtin and Feminism: The Chronotopic Imagination," where she notices

"[within] current feminist criticism [...] a new movement to read narratives dialogically, to illuminate the embedded narrative structure which resists any simple thematic signification which threatens to limit the text to one class and race and ignores ideological tension" (118). Reading a text dialogically, in the way Cave describes, entails discovering not only a narrative's underlying ideological tensions but also its evocations of time and history, and how those evocations reinforce a kind of narrative symbolic order:

The order of the narrative symbolic is the order of language, identity, and the speaking subject. The order of this time, like the order and construction of language, conveys the very value of the social system. The imposition of this particular form of time is the imposition of a particular sense of law and meaning, the imposition of a society. (121)

This Lacanian notion of a narrative symbolic is helpful here. Like Lacan's symbolic order, the narrative symbolic precedes the speaking subject, or in this case, the narrative subject. And just as Lacan's symbolic imposes a systemic order – a complex network of linguistic and symbolic codes – so too does a narrative symbolic with its temporal and ideological impositions, as Cave puts it. I would suggest that the chronotope itself is really just another name for this narrative symbolic; both concepts are attempts to theorize the ways that narrative is conditioned by history, arranged by temporality, and conducted by logics of referentiality. Theorized in this way, Woolf's novel, I would argue, dramatizes the ways that history, temporality, and referentiality resist facile narrativization. The novel, that is, stages the narrative subject's conflictual encounter with history, which is why it is fitting that temporality breaks down in the novel. Where, the novel asks in particular, does the female subject of Woolf's narrative stand in relation

to history? Are the temporal shifts and discontinuities in *Mrs. Dalloway* meant to represent the female subject's uneasy position in this time and space? Does the chronotope impose narrative strictures, in a sense, given its circumscribed field of referentiality? And does the chronotope itself become a type of other, then, an uninhabitable – or inhospitable – narrative context? Cave notes that

feminist critics have only recently begun to examine the manner in which the neat ideological closures of a dominant [...] chronotope are disrupted by a threatening "Symbolic" chronotope of real time and events. What makes the disparity of these chronotopes strikingly clear are the accidental or chance encounters of the (female) protagonists with the threatening "other," an other whose identity is alien to the protagonist and through which, most pertinently, the protagonist is unable to link her identity. (122)

This is where I would situate the conflict between Clarissa and Miss Kilman. The tensions between them, arising from their divergent interests in Elizabeth's femininity, are of a piece with the novel's deeper engagement with and critique of a normative femininity, which is also a chronotopic femininity.

This notion of a chronotopic gender, or even that gender is inherently chronotopic, is another focus of Cave's essay. She considers what the chronotope adds to feminist criticism. Early in the essay, Cave asks,

What is the relation of the female to space and time? What are the possible chronotopes of the female? Of the male? [...] Is the means by which the self breaks out of a cultural identity also the means by which "cultural" time and space is fractured? What dialogic battles occur between our "historical" sense of time and the protagonist's displacement of it? Might we be able to trace a trajectory of female time and a trajectory of feminine space once feminism reconciles itself with narratology? (119)

These questions posit an integral relation among gender, time, and narrative. As a theory of time/space representation in narrative, the chronotope provides a useful interpretive

lens for *Mrs. Dalloway*, given the novel's temporal displacements, gendered temporalities, and tensions between time and identity, in the sense Cave describes above. That is, with respect to the novel's postwar London chronotope, we could say that Elizabeth is positioned – temporally and spatially – in relation to a prescribed cultural identity. She is set between her mother's bourgeois conservatism and Miss Kilman's socialist evangelicalism, in a sort of liminal space: she straddles the two paths offered to her by these two mother figures, and in this way, Woolf poses the question, what sort of woman will Elizabeth become? What paths might be taken by the coming younger generation of women behind Clarissa and Miss Kilman? These paths or identities, for Bakhtin, are always chronotopic; they become discernible through the very act of narrative representation. He writes that the chronotope "emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel" (22). In this way, a character's representation is chronotopically bound or determined; novelistic representation, Bakhtin even argues, "gravitate[s]" toward the chronotope (22).

How, then, can we think further about Elizabeth, with respect to chronotope? We can continue noticing the way that Woolf has positioned her narratively, and how the novel's chronotope bears upon Elizabeth's representation. In conjuring this June day in 1923, Woolf captures enough of London that her novel could be used to rebuild the city were it ever hit by catastrophe, as Joyce once quipped of *Ulysses* and Dublin. But along with the various markers of physical space in *Mrs. Dalloway* – the many streets and shops and parks – there is also the distinctive, historically accurate social backdrop that Woolf sets up within her narrative. This backdrop is comprised of subtle yet evocative

references to 1920s London. Woolf refers to contemporary scientific discourse: "Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory" (27). She conjures images of postwar nationalism: "Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (50). She finds amusing ways to convey the period's investment in normative gender: "Richard Dalloway got on his hind legs and said that no decent man ought to read Shakespeare's sonnets because it was like listening at keyholes" (73). And she gently mocks British conservatism: "[Duchesses and Countesses] had a kind of courage which the older [Clarissa] grew the more she respected. In all this there was a great deal of Dalloway, of course; a great deal of the public-spirited, British Empire, tariff-reform, governing-class spirit, which had grown on her, as it tends to do" (75). Through these details, a rich, familiar portrait emerges of London's intellectual, social, and political landscape. For Bakhtin, this landscape itself is chronotopic; it is both generated by and disposed towards the novel's chronotope: "All the novel's abstract elements philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work" (Bakhtin 22).

Woolf's novel, then, by virtue of its invocation of or conversancy with these abstract elements, is given a particular substance by its chronotope. Representations of London's postwar sentiment or political climate or class tensions or social conventions: these could all be chronotopic. So too could representations of gendered identity, which,

as I will argue in the second half of this chapter, become another form of feminist intervention at the level of narrative. For along with its sundry temporal effects discussed above – durational asynchronicity, dilatory space, temporal variety – the novel also contains an extended critique of normative gender. The brilliance of this particular critique, though, is how Woolf makes it a function of narrative. That is, Woolf deploys narrative in such a way that the novel's chronotope functions as a representational center or norm, against which alternative representations are measured. A character's gender, in this sense, could be seen as tethered to a chronotope, held within a normative range of representational possibilities. The chronotope, moreover, inheres within narrative; it is a constituent feature of the novel. Gender, therefore, as one of Bakhtin's "abstract elements," is not only chronotopic but also a sort of narrative construct, a set of scripted, naturalized behaviors that signifies masculinity or femininity or some combination of the two. To break from the script, as it were, or to denaturalize the script, opens fissures in the narrative. This is possibly an oversimplification of what Woolf achieves in Mrs. Dalloway, for it no doubt understates the novel's success in demonstrating these curious and persistent tensions between time and narrative, and between history and gender.

## Chronotopic Gender

To backtrack a little, here is arguably the most succinct definition Bakhtin gives for the chronotope: "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (15). On the one hand, a chronotope is a physical entity. It is space. *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, is set in 1923 London. The various locations, buildings, and roads that comprise this place are in part what determine its

narrativization. But there is also time. A chronotope is temporal as well as spatial, meaning that how time passes—the duration of a story and also the durations of scenes or moments within that story—determines the possibility of action or movement by its characters. For Bakhtin, though, a chronotope must be thought of as a *fusion* between time and space, a connectedness. He explains that

in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (15)

In this formulation, the chronotope is what enables time and space to materialize—to thicken, to take on flesh—into narrative. It is, as Bakhtin later explains, what "provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events" (22).

It is worth noting that among Bakhtin scholars, there has been some disagreement about just how to use the chronotope as a unit of analysis. Jay Ladin, in a 1990 essay entitled "Fleshing Out the Chronotope," which may be the most ambitious attempt to systematize and make sense of the chronotope, claims that

[often], the chronotope is invoked to justify theoretically discussions of what is more simply called setting, that is, the time or space in which narrative events unfold...[the] most ambitious attempts to use the chronotope for literary analysis are severely hindered by the absence of a fully worked-out theory of the chronotope. (214)

It is just this sort of fully worked-out theory that Ladin aims for in his essay. He demonstrates the far-reaching implications of the chronotope as an interpretative model. Curiously, however, Ladin not once mentions what I consider to be a largely consequential passage in the "Forms of Time" essay, wherein Bakhtin explains that

the chronotope...emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. (22)

What makes this passage so noteworthy is that Bakhtin here associates the chronotope with social conventions and ideologies. Such abstract elements, he claims, gravitate toward the chronotope. It is as though thought or consciousness themselves, insofar as they are informed by and molded by a novel's prevailing "philosophical and social generalizations," are determined by a literary work's chronotope. Ladin's essay, while useful for its painstaking elucidation of the chronotope's relationship to genre and also for its discussion of relationships between overlapping or competing chronotopes, neglects this social component of the chronotope theory, which I want to foreground in this next portion of the chapter. Woolf's characters gravitate toward certain behavioral norms, especially on the basis of gender, and the unseen force that produces this gravitation, I want to suggest, is a function of the novel's chronotope—this spatiotemporal dimension of narrative that both enables and concretizes representation. Chronotopic gender, then, refers to a historically determined, socially inscribed normativity cited or evoked within a narrative; its intelligibility, as a mimetic feature, arises from a narrative's aspiration to inhabit or simulate history. Naturally, as Woolf recognized, this intersection of history, narrative, and gender presents a unique opportunity to issue a critique. The ensuing paragraphs attempt to locate that critique and align it with this chapter's first half, its argument that temporal manipulation in the novel can be read as a form of queer feminism.

The novel itself clearly foregrounds time/space as a key thematic and interpretive concern. Woolf uses various images and tropes to convey the sense that this London milieu is somehow subjected to or beset by time, or by history. One of the most prominent is the image of Big Ben, whose imposing "majesty" is said to "lay down the law" (128). When Big Ben tolls, it floods Clarissa's drawing room with a "melancholy wave," whose force is "overpowering" (117-118). The clock tower is also described as intrusive, as it "worries" and "annoys" Clarissa (118). In a sense, the clock is merely reminding her of the short time remaining before her party, but in a different sense, the clock can be regarded as a symbol of order, regularity, and control. The clock stands tall above London, measuring the distance between "the hours," as the novel was originally titled, but also exerting pressure upon the London citizens, signaling when some daily activities are to be started and others are to be quitted. Big Ben, in this latter sense, comes to represent a dominant presence that structures the day and keeps people moving along in a timely manner—and not only Big Ben, but clocks more generally, particularly in this passage:

Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counseled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock, suspended above a shop in Oxford Street, announced, genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure to Messrs. Rigby and Lowndes to give the information gratis, that it was half past one. (102)

The language here becomes much more violent (shredding, slicing, dividing) and more imperious (counseled submission, upheld authority). The images of clocks come to represent a mechanized, aggressive form of control that the denizens of Harley Street

cannot help but submit to. Big Ben, I would also suggest, becomes "chronotopic" in this scene: it is both a spatial or physical entity and an emblem of time/history. In this way, time is shown to be a buttress for and regulator of social processes, and it also establishes a more immanent, more fundamental dynamic between history and narrative. This dynamic is another way of thinking about the fusion between time, space, and narrative Bakhtin describes in his essay.

Alex Zwerdling has explored this interplay between narrative and social processes in his 1988 essay "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System," where he makes the point that "Woolf was interested in the process through which an independent, responsive, emotionally supple young man or woman is gradually transformed into a conventional member of his or her class" (159). Zwerdling's comment recalls the notion of inscription, in a sense similar to the one Judith Butler develops in Gender Trouble (1990): the idea that "true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies [...] neither true nor false [...] only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (136). When Butler speaks of gender as a fantastic discursive product, she emphasizes its narrative quality. Gender, for Butler, is an "imaginable domain" (13), a form or space taken by bodies. Narrative, too, always takes a particular form and occupies a discursive space, but its formal/spatial possibilities are not infinite, just as with gender. Butler adds that not "all gendered possibilities are open [and] that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience" (13). Both gender and narrative, that is, have limits to their intelligibility, which means simply that they can only secure intelligibility by conforming to or residing

within closed, ordered signification systems, such as discourse and genre. Discourse and genre, I would suggest, are examples of the "abstract elements" Bakhtin claims arise from a chronotope, insofar as a chronotope determines these elements' intelligibility. Gender, then, as a discursive product or effect, is necessarily chronotopic. Gendered representation as well, in its mimetic relation to what Butler calls "true gender" (136), gravitates towards the chronotope, and finds its intelligible forms in the chronotope. So when Zwerdling speaks of a process of transformation that culminates in conventionality, is he not also describing the pressures exerted by a chronotope on gendered representation in narrative? Bakhtin, we recall, saw the chronotope as "a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel" (22). This is where chronotope, narrative, and gender converge or overlap. As a fundamental condition or disposition of history, a chronotope's epochal character reveals itself through narrative; narrative expresses, represents, and is compelled by its chronotope, much the same way, in a Marxist sense, that base compels superstructure, or in a biological sense, that genotype determines phenotype. There is an organic or genetic relation between chronotope and narrative, just as there is a relation between chronotope and gender. The "process" Zwerdling describes is not simply a different way of thinking about and character and characterization; it is the process by which narrative representation itself – particularly gendered representation – emerges from chronotope.

Woolf's novel demonstrates this process in an unsubtle way. In exploring how gendered subjectivity emerges, and in emphasizing the compulsory aspect of this process, *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals how identity itself is chronotopic, insofar as this 1920s London

chronotope bears the imprint of a particular historical moment. Representations of class difference, for instance, can be read chronotopically. Zwerdling reminds us that the novel "examines the governing class of England at a particular moment in history" (120), which is to say that considerations of time and space – chronotopic elements – are always important in reading *Mrs. Dalloway*. This London chronotope, with its classed conventions and expectations, entails a deep normativity, a representational center towards which the narrative gravitates. And this normativity becomes most legible in the novel's narrativizations of gendered identity.

As Clarissa ventures forth into the London morning, for instance, the focalized narrative makes us privy to her engagement with a chronotopic normativity. She passes shop windows and has an impulse to purchase something for Elizabeth, but the impulse is swiftly quelled by her recollection of a banal yet overriding mantra: "one must economise" (5). Woolf's use of *one* instead of *I* allows the phrase to become more a maxim than an instance of personal discretion, and the use of *must* instead of *should* makes the phrase less suggestive than authoritarian. The phrase seems learned or insisted upon, rather than freely discovered, which would appear to impinge upon Clarissa's autonomy of consciousness, or her sense of self. Her awareness of a restrictive social convention—in this case, economizing—negates her maternal instinct.

A second example of Clarissa chafing against a chronotopic normativity occurs as she meets Hugh Whitbread on her way to buy flowers. Hugh is an exemplary governing class male, which makes his very presence—his gaze and his statements—an agent of socialization. To engage socially with Hugh is to stare into the face of someone who has

fully internalized, and who regularly models, *proper* English behavior, insofar as such a quality exists in the novel's London chronotope. Thinking of Hugh in this way makes it easier to understand why Clarissa, upon unexpectedly meeting him, feels "skimpy" and "schoolgirlish" (6). In Hugh's presence, she is intensely aware of anything remotely inadequate about her appearance. She becomes "oddly conscious...of her hat," concluding, as Hugh gazes at her, that it is "not the right hat for the early morning" (6). Also, that Woolf uses the word *schoolgirlish*, rather than *youngish* or *juvenile*, to characterize Clarissa's state of mind in Hugh's presence suggests that she feels she has something to *learn* from him. Hugh *reminds* Clarissa of this normative conventionality, whose force may slacken with someone's isolation from English high society, but is immediately restored in the presence of a class-conscious, decorous member of that social stratum.

Clarissa's relationship with Sally is another area where we observe the presence of this chronotopic normativity. Early in the novel, during one of Clarissa's moments of private reflection, it is implied that she and Richard no longer have sex. We learn that Clarissa "could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth" and that in some way "she had failed him" (31). A bit later, in the same flood of thoughts, the narrator speaks of something "central [in Clarissa] which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together" (31). And further still we learn that Clarissa

could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly [...]she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as

it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! (31-32)

I quote this passage at length because it so powerfully demonstrates Clarissa's sexual ambivalence. There is, first, quite clearly an insinuation of sexual tumescence and climax – that spreading blush, that quivering, that swollen pressure of rapture, and that gushing and pouring. She emerges from her fleeting moment of wifely guilt over "failing" Richard into a rapturous, orgasmic, moment of imagined (or remembered) intimacy with another woman. When Clarissa feels this attraction to women, it is neither shameful nor awkward but "revelatory," as though the inner truth of her sexual desire is suddenly rushing to the surface. But we notice too Clarissa's hesitation or uncertainty. She first tries to "check" her "pressure of rapture" before "yielding to its expansion." This passage is significant because it anticipates Clarissa's remembered sexual encounter with Sally, and also because it gives the sense that Clarissa's homosexual desire has persisted in her subjectivity.

Only moments later, Clarissa's thoughts turn to Sally. We learn that on the night she first met Sally, Clarissa "could not take her eyes off her," and that she saw in her "an extraordinary beauty" (33). Clarissa explains that

the strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one's feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested, and besides, it had a quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up...it sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe). (34)

Here Clarissa twice distinguishes between female/male and female/female relationships, thus assigning special significance to that "quality" that only exists between women. There is also the likening of marriage to a catastrophe, which further develops the idea that Clarissa and Sally desire each other more than they do their husbands. The disaster of marriage is something that will inevitably break them up, so to speak; it will effectively end their romance. There is a normativity that emerges here: women cannot remain intimate with each other, it seems, past the point of heterosexual marriage. The following scene makes this idea even more clear:

Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed [Clarissa] on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked... she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!—when old Joseph and Peter faced them:

"Star –gazing?" said Peter. (35-36)

The novel's most passionate, most revelatory moment between Clarissa and Sally is interrupted by (who else but) men. I would suggest that Woolf stages a policing of sexuality in this scene. Just at the moment of consummated desire between two women, there is a swift intrusion, as if to symbolize the heteronormative community's resistance to such a union. Or narratively speaking, the novel's chronotope wields compulsory social power. Peter's interruption is simply the function of a chronotopic normativity that operates within Woolf's narrative.

And later in the novel, of course, this normativity will ultimately prevail upon Clarissa, which is to say she will surrender to the dictates of her class and her sex, which are always chronotopic dictates. Rather than running away with Sally to "found [that]

society to abolish private property," Clarissa settles into a preordained role as wife, mother, and hostess (33). But this choice has significant consequences for Clarissa. Her marriage to Richard is marked more by distance than intimacy, as indicated by the "solitude" and "gulf" that Clarissa attributes to their marriage (120). And even their home is described as passionless: "the hall of the house was cool as a vault...[Clarissa] felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions" (29). These minor details about Clarissa's marriage and her home can be considered textual minutia, but when thought of alongside her highly erotic memories of Sally, they become more significant. They generate a feeling that this marriage has more to do with the novel's deeper normativity – here taking the form of heteronormative convention – than with mutual passion. Clarissa feels "like a nun" in her own home, and even forty-odd years after kissing Sally, the memory still awakens a "response to old devotions." Woolf sets Clarissa at odds with this chronotopic normativity that underlies and engenders the narrative. Clarissa's femininity is effectively tethered to this normativity evoked by the narrative. In this way, Woolf's novel explores and comments upon the spatiotemporal position of women in narrative; that is, Mrs. Dalloway posits an intimate relation between time, space, narrative, and women's representation. Cave is again useful here:

[The] question of identity is inextricably linked to space in women's narrative, as identity is unavoidably equated with the confusing dilemma of constructing self from other, constructing a narrative of self from the changing and sometimes hostile otherness of the mirror world. In the psychic process of constructing identity, the fragmented (female) protagonist will necessarily construe an image of wholeness from an outside reflection. (121)

Chronotopic normativity functions here as Clarissa's other, in the way Cave describes.

Clarissa searches in this mirror world – the novel's historical London – for a reflection of herself, but as Cave puts it, one's mirror world is often fickle and inhospitable. Like Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith, Clarissa only finds a partial reflection of herself. Publicly, she is Mrs. Richard Dalloway, mother of Elizabeth, party host, sufficiently genteel member of the ruling class; privately, though, she is wistfully meditative, even melancholic. Clarissa's narrativization, moreover, demonstrates this essential conflict between women's identities and the narrative spaces they're given to occupy.

Along with Elizabeth and Clarissa, the novel's male characters are also shown to have a conflicted relation to this chronotopic normativity in the narrative. The upper class in Woolf's novel maintains a fairly rigid notion of masculinity. Some characters, such as Hugh Whitbread and Sir William Bradshaw, satisfy this notion, while others, like Peter, struggle to do so. In order to understand this chronotopic masculinity in *Mrs*.

Dalloway, it is important to locate this quality as it appears not in a single character, but as a composite quality in the novel, something that emerges through omniscient, unattributed phrases and statements: "[If Clarissa] could have had her life over again...she would have been... interested in politics *like a man*" (10); "Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol...of man's soul; of his determination" (28); "There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness" (86, emphases added). These narrative utterances, as part of the

novel's chronotopic landscape, develop a sense of what it means to be masculine in *Mrs*.

Dalloway. Men are interested in the handling, exertion, and allocation of power (politics); they are swift and decisive and headstrong (like the flight of an aeroplane); and they require war and competition to develop a proper degree of manliness.

Two characters who very clearly embody this quality are Hugh and Sir William Bradshaw. Hugh is even referred to as "manly" with the "manners and breeding of an English gentleman" (6-7). He is also a proud employee of the British "Court," and he has the "most extraordinary, the most natural, the most sublime respect for the British aristocracy of any human being [Peter] had ever come across" (6, 72). Hugh is "obsequious" and "the greatest snob," and he feels "at peace with the entire universe, [...] completely sure of his standing" (73, 104-105). There is no struggle for Hugh. He is complacent and established. Some of this is due to the fact that Hugh very clearly satisfies the exigencies of his lofty social class, but I would argue that Hugh's security in this world is also, in part, due to his being unfailingly masculine, insofar as this novel registers such a quality. Hugh is involved in the affairs of his government (103), and he is also headstrong, as with his "pertinacious" editing of Lady Bruton's letters: "[Hugh] marvelously reduced [her] tangles to sense, to grammar...the editor of the *Times*...must respect" (110). In these ways, Hugh falls comfortably within the parameters of manliness explained above.

Sir William Bradshaw is another character who embodies the novel's chronotopic masculinity. Like Hugh, Dr. Bradshaw has risen to the top of Britain's social strata:

He had worked very hard; he had won his position by sheer ability (being the son of a shopkeeper); loved his profession; made a fine figurehead at ceremonies and

spoke well—all of which had by the time he was knighted given him a heavy look...which...together with his grey hairs, increased the extraordinary distinction of his presence. (95)

Not only does Dr. Bradshaw model proper masculinity—by virtue of his involvement in politics, his "infallibility," his "certainty," his affluence, and his imposing "presence"—but he also comes to the aid of those who are conspicuously *lacking* in masculinity, like Septimus (95). Dr. Bradshaw is both a (troublingly unscientific) psychiatrist and an agent of socialization. Critics of the novel have noticed this aspect in Dr. Bradshaw's character, particularly Margaret Blanchard, who asserts that because Septimus has

not sufficiently internalized the gender role society has assigned him—the stoic male—he becomes a threat to society. He must be "put away." For if his grief is accepted as natural, how will it affect all the other soldiers who suffered the same experience? If everyone's role breaks down, there will be no men left to send to war to protect the interests of people like Bradshaw who profitably maintain the social order at home. (303)

And that is precisely the service Bradshaw performs for Septimus and anyone else who lacks Proportion: he maintains the social order by denying the existence of "madness" and prescribing "rest" as an antidote for depression and presumably any other psychological infirmity (96). Men like Septimus who lack Proportion upset the gendered social order, which requires that men be like Hugh and Dr. Bradshaw: poised, prosperous, heterosexual, nationalistic, and strong-minded. These gendered qualities also continue to remind us of a chronotopic normativity in the narrative, which effectively hails them, in a way that resembles the theory of ideological interpellation Louis Althusser famously describes in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)":

I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' [...] Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). (162-63)

Chronotopic normativity need not even call out to its subjects. It recruits and indeed hails by virtue of its amplified presence in social practices and structures. Whereas Althusser's interpellated subject effectively responds to ideology, through quotidian encounters with ideological mechanisms (what Althusser calls "ideological state apparatuses," or ISAs), the chronotopic subject gravitates towards normative modes of self-formation and self-fashioning, which could include gender identity and presentation. So when Woolf emphasizes the various ways in which Bradshaw has come to embody masculinity, she aligns him with – not against – chronotopic normativity. Bradshaw's "extraordinary distinction" and "infallible accuracy" become signifiers of a chronotopic masculinity (95), which he will unsuccessfully try to cultivate in Septimus.

Before turning to Septimus, with whom Woolf registers her most forceful critique of this normative masculinity, I want to briefly discuss Peter Walsh. In some ways, Peter's masculinity is sufficiently legible. He has a nationalistic fervor, observable when he gazes approvingly upon a group of "boys in uniform" marching stiffly, with an expression on their faces that Peter likens to "the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty..., fidelity, and love of England" (51). Or later, as Peter looks upon the ambulance carrying the lifeless body of Septimus, he praises the

"efficiency, the organization, the communal spirit of London" (151). Peter's sense of English pride does, in this world, lend him a degree of masculinity. Still, Peter is not exactly manly, not in the way Bradshaw and Hugh are. He is given to weeping (46) and flights of fancy (52-54), both of which we can presume would violate a healthy sense of Proportion. Peter is financially unstable, as evidenced by his needing to "see whether Richard couldn't help him to some job" (50). But most important is the fact that Peter again and again refers to himself as a "failure" (42). What exactly has Peter failed at? It is significant that Peter sees himself as a failure, not because he has fallen short of some personally desired professional goal, but "in their sense," that of Richard and Clarissa and the British upper class, those who presumably can be looked to as models of proper masculinity and femininity (42). At one point, Peter thinks to himself, "I can't keep up with them," referring to the young boys in uniform, marching up Whitehall (51). Although he means this quite literally, I would suggest that Peter's inability to "keep up" has also to do with his shortcomings as an aspiring upper-class male. Like the image of the masculine aeroplane that shoots and aspires to lofty heights, Peter too aims high, but he fails to reach the level of financial independence and professional stature that would adequately distinguish him as an upper-class male in 1920s London. He is unemployed, having to "cadge [Richard] for a job," and thus ill-suited for patriarchal marriage (74); he is strangely critical—perhaps out of envy—of an upper class lifestyle in which he seems eager to partake ("Why does she give these parties?"); and most significantly, he is not cocksure or distinguished, like Hugh or Dr. Bradshaw, but rather "hollowed out, utterly

empty within" because of his apparent inability or fear to challenge Richard's courtship of the only woman he has ever loved (49).

Having given a sense of how three of the novel's prominent male figures are positioned in relation to a chronotopic masculinity in the narrative, I want to turn now and examine Septimus. Septimus does not inhabit the same social class as the other male characters I have examined. His standing in this sociohistorical milieu is effectively proletarian, in the sense that he must sell his labor to "Sibleys and Arrowsmiths, auctioneers, valuers, land and estate agents" (85). However, in spite of his working-class status, Septimus is somehow still subjected to the very same expectations and norms modeled by the Dalloways and the Bradshaws. For instance, during a scene focalized through Lucrezia, Septimus' wife, while the two of them sit together in Regent's Park, she is clearly mortified by her husband's odd behavior:

People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car; the English people, with their children and their horses and their clothes, which she admired in a way...Help, help! she wanted to cry out to butcher's boys and women. Help!...failure one conceals. She must take him away into some park. (15-16)

Why is Lucrezia so concerned with how she and her husband are being perceived? I would suggest that this heightened, agitated consciousness is due to her overwhelming need to appear normal, or to meet a certain expectation of what a married couple ought to look like. In spite of her being an immigrant, Lucrezia is already aware of London's prevailing standards of appearance, those which are performed and sustained by the ruling class and internalized and aspired to by everyone else. There may very well be legible class distinctions in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but it is really only one class's societal norms

that govern character behavior in the novel. As Zwerdling maintains, "the novel is in large measure an examination of a single class and its control over English society—the 'governing class,' as Peter Walsh calls it" (145). Therefore, Septimus and Lucrezia may not be wealthy or renowned, but they are nevertheless inscribed by and measured against the norms of those who are. They are made to conform to normalcy in "their sense," as Peter puts it, but that normalcy and one's compulsory awareness of it are always *other*, in the same sense Cave describes above, influenced by a range of expectations, conventions, and behavioral norms of which the socially engaged individual is forcibly aware. Here, again, we see the fusion of time (the social world of 1922 London) and narrative, where the novel's chronotope consists, in part, in its social world, or its *socius*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's term for an imagined field upon which social control and coordination occur. This chronotopic normativity in Woolf's novel – this homogenizing social environment – regulates and compels gendered identity.

We see this most tragically with Septimus's suicide. Among the many critics of *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is little consensus on the question of what drives Septimus to end his life. Suzette Henke seemingly makes a virtue of Septimus' death, conceiving of it as "an escape from authoritarian forces that would rape his consciousness, trammel his soul, and imprison him in a madhouse down in Surrey" (126). Henke adds that, "[by] 'throwing it all away', Septimus makes of his life an unspoiled, gratuitous offering, [preserving] the chastity of spirit that Clarissa jealously guards in the privacy of her attic room" (126). This reading endows Septimus with a martyr's sense of righteousness, making the suicide seem less tragic than heroic. Lee Edwards offers a different

perspective: "[The] doctors themselves are what cause Septimus' disease and ultimately his death; [...] [they] are a machinery of destruction whose unacknowledged presence Septimus perceives but cannot conquer" (106). Unlike Henke, who emphasizes Septimus' willfulness to "preserve a chastity of spirit," Edwards sees his suicide as beyond his immediate control. Septimus cannot "conquer" the agents of socializations that ensnare him. This reading is similar to Johanna Garvey's, who is one of the few critics to acknowledge Septimus' implicit sexual orientation: "[For] Septimus, the city's time and space have lost their official ordering: his experiences as solider, his latent homosexuality, and the ignorant intervention of Dr. Bradshaw cause him to turn away from 'civilization' into madness" (63).

Garvey's interpretation of the suicide is closest to a question surprisingly few critics have given extensive attention to: are we to infer that Septimus is gay? Evidence for this assertion is rather scant. There is certainly an intimacy or special companionship between Septimus and Evans: "They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other" (86). And if we consider that he "married his wife without loving her" and that Evans' death produces a sort of inner or emotional death in Septimus (86-87), then we can reasonably infer that Septimus's affection for his male officer exceeds that for his spouse (91). There is no explicit textual evidence of a romantic or sexual aspect in Septimus' relationship with Evans, but the way in which Woolf characterizes the *effect* of Evans' suicide upon Septimus implies a deep and special union between the two, not unlike that between lovers.

Assuming for a moment that Septimus is implicitly gay (or perhaps bisexual), it is important to notice the way in which such relationships are depicted or treated in the novel. Relationships that are, or simply have the potential to become, homosexual are either forbidden or deemed taboo in Mrs. Dalloway. In Sally Seton's relationship with Clarissa there is an unmistakable sexual tension and mutual desire between them, but one which is interrupted by a symbolic imposition of the social order: a heterosexual man's comments stifle and thus prohibit same-sex, mutual desire between two women. There is also the example of Doris Kilman's relationship with Elizabeth Dalloway. Clarissa speculates as to the nature of Elizabeth's fondness for Miss Kilman very early in the novel: "It might be falling in love. But why with Miss Kilman?" (11). The idea that her daughter could be falling in love with Miss Kilman clearly bothers Clarissa, as does the fact that Miss Kilman influences Elizabeth's manner and interests: "[Miss Kilman and Elizabeth] were inseparable, and Elizabeth, her own daughter, went to Communion; and how she dressed, how she treated people who came to lunch she did not care a bit" (11). Could it be that Clarissa, who herself once had a homosexual flirtation denied, has now succumbed to and internalized a deterministic, heteronormative conception of romantic coupling? It is also interesting that Clarissa delights in the fact that Elizabeth has begun to draw comparisons to "poplar trees, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies," tropes of physical beauty (134). This deepens the sense of Clarissa's investment in a heteronormative femininity; she valorizes the favorable attention given to her daughter's appearance with little regard for Elizabeth's other attributes. This, along with the above examples of stifled or discouraged homosexuality, further demonstrate the novel's

chronotopic normativity, this magnetized pole, which exerts a discernible pressure on the narrative. Gender and sexuality, in particular, are fastened to a normative representational pole, toward which "[all] of a novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate [and] take on flesh and blood," to quote Bakhtin again (22). In reading the chronotope in this way, we also gather a sense of the London Septimus returns to immediately following the war. So if Septimus is gay—or at the very least, more intimate in his relations with men than women—it is understandable why he lapses into madness and despair: the nation he fought for would rather stifle than encourage his "latent homosexuality," as Garvey puts it.

In the portion of Garvey's article excerpted above, she also asserts that London's "time and space" have lost meaning or coherence for Septimus and that this loss precipitates his turn into madness. I agree with this assertion, but for a different reason. Yes, it's true that Septimus' time at war, his loss of Evans, and his undesired meeting with Dr. Bradshaw each in its own way contributes to his downfall. But I would argue that his downfall—his turn into madness and subsequent suicide—is also the result of a restrictive social order that regulates male behavior, especially sexuality.

Septimus' sociohistorical milieu, 1922 London, quite literally prohibits homosexuality. Barbara Fassler reminds us that until 1964, homosexuality, though not lesbianism, remained a crime punishable by law in England (238). Is this not an example of the inscribed social body, in the Butlerian sense noted above? The legal system, in this case, decides which types of sexuality are permitted and for whom. This criminalization

of homosexuality has at least two important consequences. First, it necessitates a closeted or duplicitous existence for homosexuals, thereby lessening their freedom. And secondly, it equates homosexuality with deviancy. To be homosexual is, essentially, to be perverse or atypical or queer, much how Septimus is perceived by his doctors and his wife. Dr. Holmes, for example, finds Septimus' lack of husbandly decorum to be unusual, even repugnant:

[Septimus] had actually talked of killing himself to his wife, quite a girl, a foreigner, wasn't she? Didn't that give her a very odd idea of English husbands? Didn't one owe perhaps a duty to one's wife? Wouldn't it be better to do something instead of lying in bed? [...] next time Dr. Holmes came he hoped to find Smith out of bed and not making that charming little lady his wife anxious about him. (92)

This can be read as Septimus' alienation from the role he is being summoned to honor and perform. This "duty" to which Holmes refers is mandated by the same normative social order that compels men to marry only women. If Septimus is gay, then it would not be surprising to find him alienated from his wife, lying in bed all day and contemplating self-harm.

These forces or agents of socialization are effectively cited by the narrative; they're of a piece with the chronotopic normativity I've been describing. They are a mimetic touchstone. Septimus, with a hint of irony, imagines these ineluctable forces as simply "human nature": "Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. The rack and the thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless" (98). Human nature, as we discover, has been on Septimus throughout his young life. It brings to mind the young hero of Joyce's *Portrait*, Stephen Dedalus, who

laments the "nets flung at the soul of man...to hold it back from flight" (Joyce 220). Septimus' artistic temperament is in conflict with his culture's expectations, and like Stephen, he must leave:

[Septimus] left home, a mere boy, because of his mother; [...] because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud; and so, making a confidant of his little sister, had gone to London leaving an absurd note behind him, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous. (82)

Septimus' inflated ambitions are in one sense amusing, but they also demonstrate the widening gulf between who he hopes to be and who his environment demands him to be. We find further evidence of this in Septimus' dealings with Mr. Brewer, his employer at Sibleys and Arrowsmiths. Mr. Brewer is said to have a "paternal" interest in Septimus (83). He worries that Septimus "look[s] weakly," perhaps not manly enough, and he "advises" football for Septimus, presumably to correct his slight physique (84). It is telling that Woolf uses the verb *advise* here as opposed to *suggest* or *recommend* because advising can connote professional consultation, as in *legal advice*. Formed as he is, with the sensibilities of a poet and the stature of someone unacquainted with football, Septimus must be advised by Mr. Brewer as to how to become more "manl[y]" (84).

Shortly thereafter, Septimus volunteers for the war. But he is motivated not by jingoism or a newfound sense of manliness, but by an interest in preserving England's literary tradition and protecting his favorite teacher: "[Septimus] went to France to save an England that consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (86). The final effect of the war upon Septimus, however, is to anesthetize him, to render him incapable of feeling. For how else to

explain his reaction to Evans' death: "[When] Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime...He could not feel" (86-87). Septimus finally, reluctantly internalizes the quality that Mr. Brewer and Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw would hope to find in their countrymen. He becomes hardened, proud, and insentient, the sort of man glorified by this 1917 Gerald Spencer Pryse painting (see fig. 1):

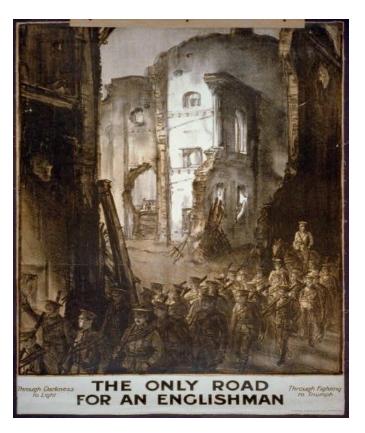


Fig. 1. Gerald Spencer Pryse. "The Only Road For An Englishman."

The things that Septimus desires—most notably, sexual autonomy and a life as a poet—are beyond the range of acceptability for male characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. His very

presence in this time and place—this London chronotope—ensures, in fact requires, that Septimus learn how to be a proper Englishman. Also, as the seat of the British empire, London is the source of far-reaching legal and institutional power, which gives this particular chronotope even greater force. As a British subject, near the height of British Imperialism, Septimus resides within a place and time whose social landscape, as Zwerdling puts it, is characterized by its "solidity, rigidity, and stasis" (122). This is the inflexible, imposing social apparatus represented in Woolf's narrative. It arises from the novel's distinctive chronotope and entails a corresponding, historically particular normativity. Septimus is made to forcibly internalize this normativity and is thus inscribed by and with the norms of his society. But as with any instance of coercion, there is often resistance. This is what I believe most contributes to Septimus' suicide: his inability to peacefully reconcile an intrusive, self-effacing normativity with his natural interests and desires. Septimus therefore violently resists the social constraints that threaten to consume him. As Morris Philipson more succinctly puts it, "Septimus is overwhelmingly fractured by forces he cannot control" (129).

It is in this sense that the chronotope becomes relevant, for it provides an answer to an important question I have yet to address: What makes this normativity different from one literary text to the next? Because the chronotope's function, as Bakhtin explains in the first sentence of his essay, is to "assimilate real historical time and space in literature," its influence upon a novel situated entirely within a specific day in history cannot be overestimated (15). Jay Ladin is right to question those who invoke the chronotope to "justify theoretically discussions of what is more simply called setting"

(214). The formalist notion of setting is not traditionally concerned with sociohistorical particulars, such as conventions, ideologies, and gender roles. These particulars, these "spatial and temporal indicators," as Bakhtin puts it, "take on flesh...[and] become artistically visible" through a literary work's chronotope (15). So the chronotope—its theorized power to make ideas and generalizations themselves *gravitate* or tend towards a fixed point—becomes a sort of representational DNA; it generates superstructural features in the novel, such as representations of gender.

In addition to sustaining this representational gravity or drift in the novel, the chronotope also effects a particular homogeneity of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Very early in the novel, during the scene on Bond Street, we cannot help but notice the way Woolf creates a uniformity of responsiveness among the backfiring motor car's observers:

The motor car with its blinds drawn and an air of inscrutable reserve proceeded towards Picadilly, still gazed at, still ruffling the faces on both sides of the street with the same dark breath of veneration whether for Queen, Prince, or Prime Minister nobody knew. The face itself had been seen only once by three people for a few seconds. Even the sex was now in dispute. But there could be no doubt that greatness was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first and last time, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England..." (16)

It is remarkable, I think, that Woolf does little, if anything, to distinguish these various onlookers in the crowd. They are treated as a single, undifferentiated mass. These people do not have bodies or faces. They only exist by virtue of their gazing and veneration. Even more telling is the fact that the identity of the motorcar's passengers is never ascertained, yet the sheer possibility that royalty or a high-ranking member of

government is close by sets off a wave of obligatory, arbitrary genuflection. On one level, this scene may serve to characterize an inflated, postwar love of nation; these people may simply need to believe that meaning still exists in their royal traditions and figureheads. On a different level, however, the scene demonstrates a knee-jerk responsiveness. The faceless mass is oddly compelled to react and to gaze, a manner of behavior appropriately thought of as groupthink, which Eric Stern describes as an "excessive concurrence-seeking that crowds out critical deliberation" (102). There exists in this crowd an overwhelming impulse to conform to prevailing custom, such as we might find with royal subjects in the presence of a monarch. The crowd's heightened awareness of convention, of how one ought to behave, demonstrates this presence of an underlying, contingent representational pole, this 1920s London chronotope.

The above examples demonstrate the gravitational tug of chronotopic normativity in Woolf's novel. Bakhtin's use of gravity, as a trope meant to suggest the irresistible force of the chronotope, is important to consider. Gravity suggests pressure or coercion or even legality, as in the laws of gravity. Prescriptive and restrictive social conventions operate this way in *Mrs. Dalloway*, gravitationally. Characters do not choose these conventions as much as gravitate toward them, especially on the basis of gender. The chronotope's importance, in this regard, is that it assimilates an historical moment in a literary text. Woolf's novel, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, is set on a single, specific day in history, in a specific city, and in both cases, there is an attempt made by the author to preserve and render a feeling particular to that day and that place—its conventions, its manner of speech, and its mood. Part of this feeling in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a pressure to

conform, and to surrender autonomy. The novel's chronotopic normativity, arising from its historical moment, is a homogenizing social awareness that Woolf's characters resist, but never forget. This awareness of convention, of societal norms performed and adhered to by the upper class, makes it possible for seemingly essential human qualities to emerge. Gendered identity, as I have suggested, begins to appear fixed and innate, rather than fluid or inscribed or "performative," as Butler has argued of gender. Woolf's novel constructs and essentializes gender, but with a particular irony. The irony is that characters like Hugh and Dr. Bradshaw, who proudly and resolutely embody proper social conventions, are mainly contemptible. Although they are prosperous and respected, they are also pompous and arrogant and naïve. Finally, there is the case of Septimus. Woolf's characterization of Septimus is that of a defeated man. He is defeated by an unrelenting socialization process that requires him to love his wife, his country, and his job—in other words, to be a proper man.

A key function of this novel's feminism, then, is that it casts derision on this process. The novel effectively repudiates the very idea of normative gender by insisting upon its constructedness, contingency and instability. And by foregrounding historical particularity in her novel, Woolf invites us to consider how the chronotope exerts representational pressures on a narrative. The novel's distillation of a chronotopic normativity in postwar London should be regarded as feminist, as it demonstrates how narrative form is conditioned by time/space, by history. So, too, should the novel's temporal effects be regarded as feminist, given where and how they occur. Whereas Woolf's engagement with chronotopic normativity develops, over the course of the

novel, into a critique of gendered normativity, her use of temporal and perspectival variety opens spaces in the narrative where she can comment on and resist that normativity.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> A narrative's *syuzhet* can be thought of as its "how," while its *fabula* can be thought of as its "what"; that is, the *syuzhet* of Woolf's novel is its narrative style – free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, time lapses, moments of being, etc. – while the *fabula* is the entirety of its narrative events. Very often, as with much of Modernist fiction, the *syuzhet* will influence how readily we can follow and comprehend the *fabula*.

## **Chapter Three**

## Trickster Feminism in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride

A stress test, in the conventional sense, is one where pressure is applied to an object in order to determine how much of that pressure can be withstood, the idea being to discover when and how stress could cause an object to weaken or fail. This chapter begins with the perhaps unusual suggestion that, like an engineering laboratory, literary narratives can conduct stress tests—of a particular sort. If, for instance, a novel contains a representation of some abstract idea (perhaps a social movement or political philosophy), the narrative could stage a series of dramatic situations where the abstraction is shown to endure or falter, inviting the reader to consider its coherence and integrity. We could say, for instance, that this is one function of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: through its representation of Edna's will to self-determination and its abrupt, tragic ending, the novel subjects the very idea of self-determination to a stress test. The question of self-determination's viability is narrativized.

In this way, a narrative's form takes on a distinct rhetorical function. That is, when a narrative contains this sort of stress test, it has the potential to lend credence to or cast suspicion upon an idea or set of ideas. In the pages that follow I explain how Margaret Atwood's 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* subjects feminism—variously figured in the novel as female friendship, female self-determination, and mother/daughter dynamics—to a stress test in order to explore its vulnerabilities and demonstrate its resilience. Building a narrative both where the bonds between women become strained by a variety of weighted tensions and where these women undergo considerable

individual hardship, Atwood's novel ultimately suggests that these bonds are uniquely impervious to stresses that could weaken or destroy other relationships. As emblems of feminism, these bonds function as a figurative material to which pressure is applied, testing its durability. Perhaps ironically, the narrative element that imposes this pressure is a female character, Zenia. Largely an agent of discord and disunion—a trickster, in the folkloric tradition Atwood draws from—Zenia injures or selfishly prevails upon the novel's three central women, ruining each of their marriages/relationships and effectively mocking the trust and kindness they offer her. The stress test here consists in the tensions Atwood creates among and within these characters, all of whom – even Zenia – can be read as beneficiaries of feminism. How, the novel asks, might this progressive movement towards female community and empowerment be made to wither or buckle beneath the stresses of internecine conflict? Are there ways, that is, in which feminism could set women against each other, engendering competition for individual power as opposed to collaboration for group empowerment? Also, from the perspective of narrative form or technique, how does Atwood's female trickster represent yet another writer's engagement with Woolf's shadow? How, that is, does the novel both subvert gendered conventionality—given that the trickster is most commonly male—and create a liminal space in the narrative, where feminism's viability and resilience may be examined more critically? Atwood's novel is engaged with these questions, ultimately demonstrating that the positive, uplifting energies of feminism (community, companionship, economic advancement, educational attainment, et al.) are sufficient to withstand *perversions* of feminism, typified in many of Zenia's behaviors. The

friendship among the three central women, more specifically, remains steadfast, even as this fourth woman provokes discord.

My argument in this chapter, moreover, is that Zenia functions as a stress test for feminism in that Atwood uses this character type – a female trickster – to foment conflict for women represented as its beneficiaries. Or, in keeping with the novel's titular invocation, we could say that Zenia lures these women close to her so that she can rob and consume them. Just as in the Grimm fairy tale, though, this robber ultimately fails. Zenia does considerable damage, but the friendship among the central trio of women endures and prevails. This intimate circle of female friendship, at the end of the novel, represents a safer, more nurturing social space than the one Tony, Roz and Charis experienced as children; it also foreshadows a less precarious, less harrowing childhood for Charis' daughter, Augusta. Atwood thereby suggests with her postmodern trickster tale that intimacy and community among women are what sustain feminism, perhaps more so than other meaningful areas of women's lives such as their romantic relationships and careers. The tensions inherent in feminism, as figured in the novel, are ultimately a stress that can be withstood.

*Narrative and Feminist Typology* 

Before looking closer at Zenia's narrative function and how her tricksterism engenders narrative tensions, I begin here by explaining how each of the novel's three main characters embodies a particular type of feminism. Looking first at Tony, we find a character whose diminutive physical stature—her "tiny" figure, "short" height, and "petite" physique—is a stark contrast to the largeness of her professional

accomplishments as an academic historian (23, 29). Tony is indeed successful, having published two books in her primary research area—historically significant ambushes during war—and also having secured gainful employment as a university professor. It is noteworthy that the inhospitable, clearly sexist culture of her profession, where "[male] historians think she's invading their territory," has not kept Tony from advancing in her career (23). Part of the sexism she encounters is from men who consider Tony's interest in war unfeminine, or an encroachment into the rugged, masculinized arena of armed combat. Her male colleagues think she "should leave their spears, arrows, catapults, lances, swords, guns, planes, and bombs alone" and instead "be writing social history, such as who ate what when, or Life in the Feudal Family" (23). And it is not only the men in her department who are irritated by Tony's gendered impropriety; even her female colleagues, "of whom there are not many," regard her professional interests as disappointingly unladylike (23). Tony's female peers "think she ought to be studying birth; not death, and certainly not battle plans. Not routs and débâcles, not carnages, not slaughters. They think she's letting women down' (23). Clearly, there is an operant gendered normativity in Tony's work environment, which prescribes some areas of study acceptably pursued by men and others by women.

Atwood's representation of this space is on the one hand a commentary on gendered career pathways in academia. The gendering of military history as masculine and family/domestic history as feminine reflects an old-fashioned ideology of "separate spheres," prevalent in western cultures at least since the Industrial Revolution but modernly regarded as primitive and oppressive. Even on Tony's Toronto university

campus, in the wake of multiple generations of feminist activism and social progress for women, gendered normativities persist, creating barriers instead of passageways.

Atwood's representation of Tony's professional setting and culture is on the other hand an engagement with the social history of women in academia during second wave feminism. We are told, for instance, that McClung Hall, the building on Tony's campus where her office is located, "was named after somebody or other who'd helped get the vote for women," an early reference in the novel to feminist activity (21). Even though Tony herself "didn't much care about that," giving the impression that she either does not identify as a feminist or is simply disengaged from contemporary politics, her status as a tenured professor and published author amid sexist headwinds is, at least minimally, a testament to feminism's emergence and impact (21).

Tony's personal relation to feminism is complicated, however. Given what we know of her own academic work, she can't exactly be called a feminist academic. As Fiona Tolan explains in an article on the novel's relation to second wave feminism, Tony

fantasises about challenging a feminist social historian colleague to either 'maintain that women could be just as good at war as men were, and therefore just as bad, or else that they were all by nature lily-livered sissies' (23). Rejecting the essentialist idea of a female moral superiority, Tony's challenge states that the liberal feminist claim for equality, made so frequently during the second wave, must necessarily include an acceptance of women's equal capacity for aggression. (49)

Tolan's reading is helpful because it begins to account for Tony's uneasy relation to feminism, which her private thoughts about this colleague begin to bear out. The colleague, Dr. Rose Pimlott, is inferably among those who chide Tony for having insufficiently feminine research interests, yet Pimlott is also critical of Tony's alleged

Eurocentrism and her courses' inattention to historically underrepresented viewpoints: "I think [...] that you might teach the course from the point of view of the victims. Instead of marginalizing them," she says to Tony (22). The tensions between these two women may be less attributable to professional competition than to their deeper, ongoing negotiation of femininity after feminism. As Tolan rightly notes, Tony is mindful of a feminized essentialism that pervades her academic culture, an observation on her part that bespeaks a feminist sensibility. But Tony's defensiveness, upon having Pimlott question her scholarly engagement with victimhood, puts her out of step with a feminism for which historical victimhood is a contested, unstable subject position. In response to Pimlott's criticism, Tony contentiously asks, "Which victims?" [...] 'They were all victims! They took turns! Actually, they took turns trying to avoid being the victims. That's the whole point about war!" (22). Even as Tony's remarks here evince a nuanced understanding of victimhood, underscoring how the conquerors can quickly become the conquered, she either sidesteps or trivializes perspectival diversity among victims—or, the narrativization of their disparate experiences—which irritates Pimlott. Pimlott's insistence upon recovering and featuring marginalized perspectives is more in step with the third wave feminism typical of the novel's 1990s setting. Tony's feminism, moreover, is not an identification with or advocacy for a set of ideals; it is, rather, an ambition—buoyed by feminism's impact on academia—to inhabit a professional space dominated by men and policed by both women *and* men.

The same could be said of Roz, to an extent. Like Tony, her ambitions and opportunities—she is the chief executive of a popular women's magazine—are somewhat

attributable to feminism's splintering of the historical glass ceiling for women in business. Roz came of age in an era when more women began to occupy upper management positions in Canada and the United States. Her current social position in the narrative present, the early 1990s, is not something Roz could easily envision for herself as a child. One morning, as she and Boyce (her assistant) arrive to a meeting, Roz remembers "her very first meeting like this: she'd grown up thinking business was something mysterious, something way beyond her, something her father did behind closed doors. Something only fathers did, that girls were forever too dull-witted to understand" (102). This description of Roz's youthful perception of her father's masculinized business dealings is another instance of an ideology of separate spheres in the narrative, where young girls could be made to regard their gender as a kind of handicap. But even as Roz was made to see business as exclusively a male endeavor, she was also critical of this gendered partition:

[It] was just a bunch of men sitting in a room, frowning and pondering and twiddling their gold-filled pens and trying to fake each other out. [Roz had] sat there watching, trying to keep her mouth from falling open in astonishment. *Hey! Is this all there is? Holy Moly, I can do this!* And she can, she can do it better. Better than most. Most of the time. (102)

The ambient sexism of Roz's childhood did not keep her from recognizing her own ability to succeed in business. One aspect of Roz's relation to feminism, then, is her being relatively peerless as a powerful woman in the publishing industry.

Also, while it is true that Roz was born into privilege, it is not as though her father had an enlightened understanding of gender bias or that having a daughter elicited in him a newfound concern with women's advancement. Roz's father was no feminist, which we

gather through her recollection of working as his office aide as a teen: "You'll be my right hand man, he'd tell her." It was meant as a compliment, so she wouldn't feel bad about not being a son" (339-40). Even as her father provided measured, paternalistic access to upward social mobility and greater career prospects—he gave her a part-time job and taught her things about succeeding in business—Roz remembers being made to feel undermined or tethered: "Roz had some ideas of her own [for the business]. She knew she could be good at this stuff if [her father would] give her rope (340). But rope was not given by him" (340). Or at times her father was simply overprotective, perhaps betraying his latent sexism: "Roz wanted to take a trip to Europe, by herself, but her father wouldn't let her. He said it was too dangerous. 'What goes on over there, you don't need to know,' he told her. He wanted to keep her walled up behind his money. He wanted to keep her safe" (341). This image of a wall of money sheltering Roz from the outside world is a fitting symbol of her father's sense of his own power, or of his over-protective instinct towards his daughter. Moreover, this dynamic between Roz and her father, where he stands as gatekeeper to both institutional power and social mobility, made her entry into the publishing industry seemingly imminent but not altogether unimpeded. That is, Roz's privilege was mitigated by her father's half-hearted, restrained support.

Still, perhaps through being a "quick learner," a "tough negotiator" and "one of the best [in her industry]," Roz does become president of a successful publishing house, which positions her in a contributory relation to feminism (94). As someone overseeing the selection and dissemination of mass media content, Roz has a hand in shaping the cultural milieu she inhabits, which includes the political discourse. Early on in her

career, "when the women's movement hit town in the early seventies, Roz was sucked into it like a dust bunny into a vacuum cleaner," and because of her "high profile" and her publishing assets, she was able to leverage this power to promote women's interests (387). Roz decided to invest in and effectively rescue the women's magazine WiseWomanWorld—reminiscent of the actual modern women's magazine Cosmopolitan—which features articles about dating, parenting, sexual harassment, women's health, and other topics related to contemporary womanhood (388). While women's magazines like WiseWomanWorld could be regarded as instruments of a normative socialization, which feminism is often interested in critiquing and resisting, they have also historically been outlets for women's voices, for women's literary culture, and for uniting women across different cultures and generations.<sup>2</sup> The sincerity of Roz's actual interest in and advocacy for the magazine is perhaps questionable since she is clearly motivated by unresolved psychic entanglements from childhood:

Roz loved the consciousness-raising groups, she loved the free-ranging talk. It was like catching up on all the sisters she'd never had, it was like having a great big family in which the members, for once, had something in common; it was like being allowed, finally, into all the groups and cliques she'd never quite been able to crash before. (387)

Still, even if Roz's decision to purchase the magazine arises from some misplaced or disingenuous sense of social connection, this is fairly immaterial with respect to how her ownership of the magazine relates to feminism. Insofar as *WiseWomanWorld*, on balance, does more to promote feminist interests than to hinder them, Roz's patronage of the magazine is "indispensable" (388). The "cash-starved" publication, which was about to fail before Roz's involvement, ultimately continues to feature "mature [women]

achievers," "stories about struggling to overcome sexism and stacked odds," and "heavyhitting health care stories"—that is, until Zenia later entirely reconceptualizes the magazine and jettisons its more progressive content (387, 388, 409). In addition to this position of power with the magazine, there is yet another way that Atwood links Roz with feminism: through her being a mother to twin girls, Erin and Paula. The safe, nurturing environment Roz creates for her daughters could itself be taken as a form of feminism, but there is something else in her relationship with them that has a more distinctly feminist aspect to it. In one of the novel's sections focalized through Roz, we learn about her daughters' great love of narrative and storytelling. What is notable about this interest in storytelling, though, is how Erin and Paula desire a certain kind of agency as both consumers and producers of narrative. After remembering how her eldest child, Larry, was a fairly passive audience when she read to him – he would "sit gravely silent" – Roz's thoughts shift to a contrasting memory of her girls who "would fight her for control of the story" (325). Roz also remembers a period of the twins' early childhood when they

decided that all the characters in every story had to be female. Winnie the Pooh was female, Piglet was female, Peter Rabbit was female. If Roz slipped up and said 'he,' they would correct her: *She! She!* they would insist. All of their stuffed animals were female, too. Roz still doesn't know why. When she asked them, the twins would give her looks of deep contempt. 'Can't you *see?*' they would say. (326)

Roz's ceding of narrative control to her daughters, even if done playfully, is significant because it allows them to experience a sort of authorial agency, where they actively determine a story's details and outcome. In this way Roz facilitates her girls' immersion in fictional narrative, providing curated yet untrammeled access to literature. There is

indeed some degree of motherly curation as it is clear that Roz herself chooses titles such as *Anne of Green Gables* and *Peter Pan*, but there are no evident barriers or restrictions for the girls' reading choices (326). Roz's daughters are provided a much freer, safer, and more stable environment than she herself had in childhood. This, coupled with their father's frequent "absences," may explain why Erin and Paula as children are both self-assertive and strangely averse to male characters (326). Roz worries that the girls' unusual insistence to re-gender all male characters as female may be a "reaction" to Mitch being away so often (326). Even a distinctly loathsome male character like the titular robber bridegroom, from a book of Grimm fairy tales Tony gave as a gift to the girls, must be changed to a woman. Indirectly then, it is Roz's daughters who give the novel its title, for while Tony is the one who actually suggests re-naming the Grimm story to "The Robber Bride," she is merely following the girls' instructions:

'The Robber Bridegroom' reads Tony, long ago, a twin at each elbow. The beautiful maiden, the search for a husband, the arrival of the rich handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and then chops them up and eats them. 'One day a suitor appeared. He was...' 'She! She!' clamored the twins. [...] 'We could change it to *The Robber Bride*,' says Tony. 'Would that be adequate?' The twins gave it some thought, and say it will do. (326-7)

Roz herself, seemingly familiar with the fairy tale, is taken with the idea of having the robber be a bride instead of a groom, and making this change to the Grimm villain prompts a comparison to her personal villain: "*The Robber Bride*, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia" (327). This playful feminization of male characters, then,

is essentially a children's flight of fancy, but it is also an occasion to experiment with gender and narrative, arising from a home environment conducive to free thinking. Roz creates this environment for her daughters, thereby allowing them a space for their wonder and creativity to flourish.

Roz's feminism, then, influences both her professional and maternal behaviors. The same can be said of Charis (or Karen, by birth), but these two have a very different relation to feminism. For Roz, feminism has opened a career pathway less accessible to earlier generations of women; it has also imbued her with a parental sensibility less encumbered by traditional gender roles. Charis' feminism, on the other hand, is a little harder to pin down, or to describe in a concise way. In some ways, she could be called an *eco*feminist.<sup>3</sup> As an offshoot or subfield of feminism, ecofeminism integrates a number of disparate yet adjacent movements: environmentalism, economic progressivism, liberalism, vegetarianism, new age spirituality, intersectional politics, and women's countercultures, just to give a broad sketch. In the introduction to her book *Feminism* and *Ecology* (1997), Mary Malor provides a useful account of ecofeminism's core concerns and aspirations:

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (1)

In distinction from other characters in the novel, Charis clearly exhibits behaviors and concerns in line with this strand of feminism, which other critics of the novel have

remarked upon. In Tolan's reading of Charis, for instance, she offers some starting points for an ecofeminist interpretation of the character. Here, she begins to describe a relationship between maternalism, environmentalism and Charis' aversion to violence and disunity:

The informing philosophy of ecofeminism is a connection between nature and the female body. The reckless plundering of 'Mother' nature's resources by patriarchal societies, as well as the irresponsible pursuit of wars and wealth, is connected to a more general idea of man's abuses of the maternal body. In accordance with these views, Charis is a pacifist, [as] 'she didn't approve of wars, or of thinking about them' (213), and a spiritualist: 'we are all part of everybody else, she muses. We are all a part of everything.' (48)

In suggesting this "accordance" between an ecofeminist ethics and Charis' ecospirituality, Tolan advances our understanding of the character's unique relation to feminism. Tolan also helps to distinguish Charis' feminism from the other two main characters. Tony's interest in and association with war contrast with Charis' pacifism, while Roz's materialism and class-consciousness contrast with Charis' new-age spirituality. Charis' feminism consists less in career-oriented advancement than in lifestyle choices that, when examined collectively, amount to a critique of profligate tendencies in modern society, especially those that exploit or degrade the natural environment.

For instance, early in the novel we are shown her heightened attention to waste and economy. While Augusta, Charis' 19-year-old daughter, is home visiting, she notices in their home's cupboards and drawers "candle ends Charis has been saving to make into other candles [...] and the partly used soaps she's been intending to cook into other soaps, and the twists of wool destined for Christmas tree decorations that got moths

in them by mistake" (46). On the one hand, these details bespeak frugality, especially given Charis' "vagueness about money," noted by Augusta with some irritation (45). On the other, they figure into a more expansive, more nuanced characterization of Charis, where along with her penchant for salvaging mundane household items there is something deeper, more dispositional in Charis' style of domestic care. In her kitchen, Charis finds creative ways to repurpose byproducts and containers, which might otherwise be thrown out:

[Augusta] orders her [mother] to get rid of the clutter in the kitchen, by which she means the bunches of dried herbs grown so lovingly by Charis every summer, and dangling —somewhat dusty, but still usable—from the nails of different sizes that stud the top of the window frame, and the hanging wire basket for eggs and onions where Charis tosses her gloves and scarves. (46)

In the image Atwood draws of Charis' domestic space, it is clear that she is mindful of consumption and conservation in ways that go beyond common recycling or thrift.

Indeed, she even thinks about this distinction—between forms of saving motivated by a concern for nature and those motivated by concern for personal economy—while she's at work one day: "Penny-pinching as a concept [Charis] finds very blocking. There's something hard and grinding about it, and *pinching* is a hurtful word. True, she saves candles and pieces of wool, but that's because she wants to, she wants to create things with them, that's an act of love towards the earth" (63). Charis is imbued with an environmentalist sensibility, reflected in these subtle touches in her home and her conscientious regard for nature.

There are further ways that Atwood develops this environmentalism in Charis' character. In this same early section of the novel, when the narrative's focalization first

shifts to Charis, we notice her inclinations towards nature, the earth, and the botanical, and how her fashion sense, parenting and housekeeping are informed by this sensibility. When she meets Tony and Roz at the Toxique for lunch, Charis wears a scarf with a "design of meadow flowers" around her neck, and her lipstick is a natural tone that "could be her real lips" (30). The narration even adds that "she resembles a slightly faded advertisement for herbal shampoo" (30). At Charis' home, she keeps a dutifully maintained vegetable garden, where

she loves kneeling in the dirt, with both hands deep in the ground, rummaging among the roots with the earthworms slipping away from her groping fingers, enveloped in the smell of mudpies and slow ferment and thinking about nothing. Helping things grow. She never uses gardening gloves, much to Augusta's despair. (55-56)

This is such a lush, sensual, even rapturous description of Charis' love of gardening: her desire to feel the earth with her bare hands, to help plant life thrive, and to have the work involved induce a kind of Zenlike state. Elsewhere, within her house, the print spread she keeps on her bed has "dark pink leaves and vines and grapes," a description made more significant perhaps by its immediate juxtaposition with Augusta's contrasting preference for the aesthetic of a "corporate lawyers' office" (44). Also, the meal Charis prepares when Augusta visits contains "leafy greens," and she also gives her daughter "sachets stuffed with rose petals [and] sunflower seed cookies" (46). This accumulation of images—of flowers, vegetation, and herbs—deepens Charis' association with nature and possibly with the green movement embraced by ecofeminists.

Her heightened regard for the natural environment isn't limited to plant life, however. There is also Charis' vegetarianism, which she attributes to the horror of

suddenly learning one morning, in childhood, that her grandmother had slaughtered and served her their pet pig, Pinky, for breakfast:

[Charis didn't] know what to do. She could start to cry and jump up from the table and run out of the room, which is what her mother would do and [was] also what she herself [felt] like doing. Instead she [set] her fork down and [took] the rubbery chewed piece of bacon out of her mouth and [placed] it gently on her plate, and [that was] the end of bacon for her, right then and there, forever. (278)

If the deep revulsion from this experience had dissipated, and its effect on her over time weakened, it would be one thing. But Charis altogether "stopped eating bacon when she was seven," while "other kinds of meat went later" (49). The trauma from this incident has far-reaching implications for her, so much so that she makes her adult home into a small-scale farm animal sanctuary and ultimately makes good on her childhood vow to refrain from eating meat. At that lunch at the Toxique, for instance, which occurs in the narrative's present, Charis orders "The Rabbit Delite—for rabbits—not of them—with grated carrots, cottage cheese, and cold lentil salad" (32).

There's yet another dimension of Charis' feminism, however, that ecofeminism doesn't quite account for. For in addition to her environmentalist sensibility, Charis has other, less nature-directed features—her new age spirituality, for instance—that are better described as hippie. Since the term "hippie" can connote different ideas to different readers, I do want to provide at least one general definition here. Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo's *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture* (2009), a study of women's contributions to—and feminism's intersections with—1960s countercultures, explains that "hippies challenged many of their elder's values by embracing antimaterialism, communal living, sexual liberation, voluntary poverty,

cooperative social and economic relations, and a romantic attachment to nature," and also emphasized "cooperation, reciprocity, interdependence, closeness to nature, physical and emotional expressiveness, egalitarianism, and nonaggression" (2). This is quite a range of personal values and qualities, but many which we see in Charis. The repeated description of Charis and her stylistic choices as "Victorian," for instance, serves to associate her with a kind of premodern nostalgia, all the more when considered alongside her dislike of urban Toronto and her resentment of present labor conditions:

Charis would rather look at the city than go there, even at dusk. Once she's in it she can no longer see it; or she sees it only in detail, and it becomes harsher, pockmarked, crisscrossed with grids, like a microscopic photograph of skin. She has to go into it every day, however; she has to work. She likes her job well enough as jobs go, but it's a job, and every job has shackles attached to it. Square brackets. So she tries to plan a small respite for each day, a small joy, something extra. (44-45, 47)

Charis has a distinct preference for the bucolic over the urban, evident not only in her above meditation on the city's harshness and opacity but also in how she enjoys residing in and caring for the home she rents on a small island on Lake Ontario, just outside of Toronto. Part of this joy comes from an immanent vitality Charis finds in the island: "She loves the house and, even more, she loves the Island. It's infused with a vibrant, brooding, humid life; it makes her feel that everything—even the water, even the stones—is alive and aware, and her along with it" (223). But her larger joy comes from cultivating life around and within this house she shares with Billy, her partner. It is remarkable just how much work and care Charis puts into this house, which again she rents, not owns. Not long after moving in, she plants a vegetable garden and uses its scraps for composting; she removes a frayed linoleum flooring and paints the

floorboards; she resuscitates the house's original, long dormant cast-iron stove; and she raises chickens in a henhouse Billy built. What I would suggest these examples of Charis' domestic exploits show, in part, is that she embodies what Lemke-Santangelo refers to as "hippie feminism," a comingling of these two subcultures that emerged in the mid-1970s, right around the span of years Charis and Billy lived in this house.

In a chapter from *Daughters of Aquarius* entitled, "Hippie Women, Feminism and the New Age," Lemke-Santangelo writes that

1970s counterculture women, much like nineteenth century social housekeepers, were using the notion of female difference to carve out spheres of influence in emerging movements: New Age spirituality, holistic health, ecofeminism, antinuclear and peace activism, and food politics. Indeed, women's claim of a deeper connection to nature, the body, and emotions and of greater intuitive and nurturing abilities gave them a decided edge in many of these new movements. (158)

It is easy to see Charis' characterization reflected in this account of counterculture women of the 70s. First, there is Charis' association with a Victorian home aesthetic, which in light of Lemke-Santangelo's description, can now be read as more than just quirky nostalgia; Charis' connection to nineteenth century domesticity becomes more feminized, a gendered demarcation of a particular sphere of influence. Within this sphere, of course, we could situate Charis' eclectic spiritual and divination practices: "Charis takes her quartz pendulum out of its blue Chinese silk drawstring bag—silk conserves the vibrations, says Shanita—and holds it over her head, watching it in the mirror. 'Will this be a good day?' she asks it. Round and round means yes, back and forth means no" (49). Charis also has a curious eschatology, comprised of ghosts, an underworld passage tunnel, spirit possession, and reincarnation:

Charis wanted to say that [...] she did mean *after* death. 'Some people don't get as far as the light,' she said. 'They get lost. In the tunnel. Some of them don't even know they're dead.' She did not go on to say that these sorts of people could be quite dangerous because they could get into your own body, more or less move into it, like squatters, and then it could be difficult to get them out again. (53)

Like so much of Charis' quaintness, this too can be read as part of her new age sensibility. But what makes this sensibility distinctly gendered, I want to suggest, is its grouping with *other* personality traits that came to signify a particular lifestyle in the late 60s and into the 70s. As Lemke-Santangelo explains,

[although] the counterculture's role in shaping lifestyle choices of the 1970s and 1980s is increasingly well documented, much of the literature focuses on the role of male 'cultural entrepreneurs,' such as the *Whole Earth Catalog*'s editor Stewart Brand, in brokering hippiedom's tastes, preferences, and practices to a broader public. Women [...] were even more central to this process. They not only dominated many New Age movements; they were the primary consumers of holistic, 'natural,' and self-help products and services. (158)

It is remarkable how closely this account of hippie women accords with Charis' chosen workplace and housekeeping style. In the novel's most detailed description of Radiance, for instance, the store where Charis works, we learn that

[it] sells crystals of all kinds, big and small, made into pendants and earrings [...] and essential oils imported from Egypt and southern France, and incense from India, and organic body creams and bath gels from California and England, and sachets of bark and herbs and dried flowers, from France mainly, and Tarot cards in six different patterns, and Afghan and Thai jewelry, and tapes of New Age music with a lot of harp and flute sounds in them. (58)

The items in this list are drawn from the feminized consumer culture Lemke-Santangelo describes above. Radiance can therefore be seen as a site of both cultural curation and community building, perhaps even a space where hippie culture and feminism can commingle. This could be due to an interesting overlap between hippie individualism and feminist progressivism, as Lemke-Santangelo explains here:

Before becoming cultural intermediaries [...] hippie women first became feminists [...] Throughout the 1960s, hippie women were focused on highly personal, individual quests for self-realization and spiritual enlightenment that were exciting and stimulating. At the same time, they were pushing the boundaries of cultural and social convention in ways that seemed plenty edgy and novel, [...] learning myriad of new skills: organic gardening, composting, animal husbandry, midwifery, holistic healing, and crafts production. (158-159)

Again, it is easy to see Charis reflected in this account of hippiedom's intersection with feminism. Like the women Lemke-Santangelo describes, Charis fashions a path to self-actualization guided by esoteric spirituality and preindustrial domesticity. In this way, she also deepens her association with a subsection of feminism emergent among the generation that came of age in the late 60s and early 70s.

In the novel's three main characters, then, we have a truly pluriform representation—a typology—of feminism. One of Atwood's most notable achievements with this novel, I would suggest, is her use of character to explore and enflesh feminism's multidimensionality. By drawing these three distinct women, each engaged with or buoyed by feminism in her own way, Atwood suggests with her narrative that the social capital engendered by midcentury, second-wave feminism extends to different kinds of women. It even extends to Zenia, who in addition to being the novel's main antagonist and a sort of postmodern trickster figure, as I will explain further below, is also a beneficiary of the changing, feminism-impacted social landscape where Tony, Roz and Charis have come of age. While the three main characters represent more wholesome, even more ethical after-effects of feminism, Zenia represents something more like a perversion or misappropriation of feminism. The other women, that is, find productive ways to engage with the social, professional and cultural spaces they inhabit, each

contributing something valuable or salubrious to their distinct spheres: academia, corporate journalism, and New Age subcultures. But Zenia's very presence, in keeping with this chapter's guiding metaphor of stressed material, has an entropic quality: those who let her into their lives are prone to disorder and chaos. In the next section, I explain more fully Zenia's complicated relation to feminism and her narrative function as a trickster figure.

## On Tricksters

Rather than simply presume Zenia's status as a trickster, I begin this section by offering some background on the trickster's generic features and showing where Zenia accords with these features. The trickster character, as archaeologists and mythologists have shown, has ancient roots in folkloric, mythic and even some spiritual storytelling traditions. In Paul Radin's seminal 1956 study of this character, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, he explains how this character appears in many cultures and literary traditions—Eastern and Western—throughout history:

The Trickster is found in clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the complex. We encounter it among the ancient Greeks, the Chinese, the Japanese, and in the Semitic world. Many of the Trickster's traits were perpetuated in the figure of the mediaeval jester and have survived right up to the present day in the Punch-and-Judy plays and in the clown. Although repeatedly combined with other myths and frequently drastically reorganized and reinterpreted, its basic plot seems always to have succeeded in reasserting itself. (xxiii)

The trickster's variability and reinterpretability are important to underscore here, particularly because Zenia is not a character who obviously belongs among jesters and clowns. Zenia's tricksterism, that is, isn't simply amusement or levity, as we might expect from these medieval trickster figures.<sup>4</sup> Zenia's tricksterism, conversely, is largely

characterized by deception, intimidation, and manipulation, giving her a darker, less innocent behavioral profile which, by modern standards, approaches sociopathy. Her beguilements occur so naturally and so effectively that at times she seems imbued with incantatory powers, which, as Shane Phelan describes in an essay on feminist trickster tales, is also in line with the narrative tradition: "Tricksters usually have special powers that enable them to perform their deceptions and their achievements [and] are uniquely complex, ambivalent creatures, equaled only by humans in their multiplicity, grandiosity, and desire" (134). This is an apt description of Zenia's character because it accounts for the fine line between her latent monstrousness and her semblant humanness. For even while Zenia figuratively preys upon those closest to her – robbing, seducing, or priming them – her behaviors are convincingly human; the patient, active attention she gives to Tony, for instance, belies Zenia's actual lack of empathy or compassion. In fact, I would suggest it is her subtle mastery of feigned affect, a kind of villainous histrionics, whereby she can ingratiate herself so effectively and exploit the trust others put in her, that gives Zenia power. Her forms of deception aren't simply exaggerations or pretensions; rather, she lies in ways intended to evoke deep, genuine pathos. Lying to Tony about her mother dying of tuberculosis, lying again about her mother, this time telling Charis she was "stoned to death by Roumanians, for being a gypsy," and lying yet again to Charis about having AIDS: these are horrifying and tragic fictions that kindle human compassion (313). Zenia knows they will induce pity and fear. Phelan adds that "[tricksters] win by the use of cunning, deceit, and unique powers," a description that could just as well be made of Zenia's character (135).

Atwood herself has at times written about the trickster, which is interesting to consider in relation to Zenia. The following excerpt is from her 1998 essay on two books by Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth and Art* (1998) and *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983):

[Trickster] is subversive in that he disrupts conventions and transgressive because he crosses forbidden boundaries, yet he displays no overtly high and solemn purposes about these activities. He's a god, but a god of dirt and mixture and of shameless, unsanctioned sex. He's a teller of lies without malice. He lies in order to cover up his thefts—thefts made from the motive of simple appetite or simply for the fun of stealing—or merely to fool people or to concoct stories to stir things up. (7)

While Atwood's essentializing of the trickster as male warrants commentary here, I want to first note some points of convergence between Zenia's character and this sketch of the trickster archetype. As noted above, Zenia's duplicity is among her most prominent traits. She repeatedly dupes or betrays those close to her, often in ways that feel malicious. Malice, as Atwood details above, is untypical for a trickster, whose behaviors tend to be unguided by ill-intention and are instead only meant to "stir things up" (Atwood 7). But Zenia is not a conventional trickster, not in the traditional sense associated with folkloric traditions. She is perhaps better regarded as a blend of trickster and antagonist, varyingly driven by impulse or intention. Still, whether Zenia's deceptions are malicious has no bearing on their effect, which is to further enshroud her true identity and past. In the novel's opening chapter, for instance, in thinking back on the history of their relationship, Tony acknowledges that "[she] isn't sure any longer which of Zenia's accounts of herself were true," and then admits more plainly that "[Zenia] would lie. She would lie earnestly, with a catch in her voice, a quaver of

suppressed grief, or she would lie haltingly, as if confessing; or she would lie with a cool, defiant anger, and Tony would believe her" (3). It is significant that this focus on Zenia's dishonesty occurs so early and so prominently in the novel, as it foreshadows her essential behavioral trait. Donna Potts, in discussing the novel's commentary on conventional femininity, offers a further elaboration of Zenia's duplicity:

She is never what she appears to be: ostensibly intelligent, Zenia actually establishes her academic reputation through cheating and blackmail; allegedly a seasoned businesswoman, Zenia has credentials that turn out to be built on lies, forgery, and theft; even her physical allure—conceded to by all—turns out to be the product of a nose job, breast enlargements, and most important, an unfailing talent for catering to male fantasies. (293)

Potts' focus on falseness and fraudulence is useful, as it accounts for an important dimension of Zenia's tricksterism. She not only fictionalizes her backstory, making it difficult to know which details of her life story are true, but she also engages in more complex, perhaps more insidious forms of deception, such as academic dishonesty and résumé fraud.

Atwood notes as well that a trickster's dishonesty may coincide with or entail the disruption of conventions and the crossing of boundaries, which we see often with Zenia. From her adultery to her sly procurements to her slaughtering of farm animals, Zenia's tricksterism not only mocks conventions and crosses lines; there is also an offhandedness or amorality in her actions. This, too, accords with Atwood's account, as she attributes a certain purposelessness to the trickster and a lack of complex motives. Phelan as well has observed this tendency towards unreason, here even associating the trickster with Dionysian irrationality: "Tricksters do not triumph or create because of virtue, reason, or beauty. The strength of tricksters is the opposite of classical or 'Apollonian' hero[es];

they win by the use of cunning, deceit, and unique powers" (Phelan 135). If a trickster's actions are mainly driven by impulse, or by a penchant for chaos, then regarding Zenia as evil isn't quite accurate. That is, since these theorizations of tricksterism often note an absence of malice, it may be misguided ascribing ill-intention to Zenia's behaviors. To sharpen this point, I would note that in Radin's introduction, he explains that "trickster possesses no values, moral or social [and] is at the mercy of his passions and appetites" (ix). Andrew Wiget, who has worked extensively on Native American tricksters, develops this idea further, writing that the trickster is

[overwhelmed] by his own appetites, preoccupied with the orifices of his own and everyone else's bodies, suffering from such severe dissociation that his right hand often indeed does not know what his left hand is doing, proclaiming his irresponsibility in word and deed and relishing it despite all costs, here is a fool fit to discombobulate the self-important servants of status and status quo. (xvi)

Wiget's description, like Radin's, maintains that the trickster is driven by appetitive compulsion, often sexually. Again, Zenia's correspondence with this feature of the trickster is readily apparent. Very early in the novel, Tony thinks about Zenia's attraction to predation, here used as a metaphor for sexual conquest: "Zenia likes hunting. She likes hunting anything. She relishes it" (40). Charis, too, comes to notice this unsettling quality in Zenia, here expressed as aggressive competition, appropriation, and again, hunting: "Zenia likes challenges. She likes breaking and entering, she likes taking things that aren't hers. Billy, like West, was just target practice. She probably has a row of men's dicks nailed to her wall, like stuffed animal heads" (313). Or, in perhaps the clearest likening of Zenia to a compulsive hunter or monster, she is even compared to a vampire: "The blood Zenia wants to drink is Tony's" (210). What these examples show,

I want to suggest, is that Zenia's most heinous behaviors are indeed in line with traditional tricksterism, insofar as tricksters are driven to unprincipled transgressions.

There is an important difference, however, between a trickster's transgressions and what might be thought of as immorality. Whereas immorality implies purposeful action—willful divergence from some moral imperative, like honesty or fidelity—a trickster's transgressions are compulsory, not volitional. We could even take this a step further and say that the transgressions bespeak a kind of animalism or carnality. Tricksters, as we recall, often appear in animal form. Depending on the culture, the trickster can appear as a coyote, bird, fox, wolf, rabbit, spider, or tortoise.<sup>5</sup> It is not a coincidence, then, that Zenia is at times described in animalistic terms, as when Tony wonder to herself, "How long before Zenia descends on them, with her bared incisors and outstretched talons and banshee hair, demanding what is rightfully hers?" (213). Or late in the novel, once Zenia has actually died, Tony nevertheless thinks to herself that Zenia "will outfox them, just as she's outfoxed everyone else" (504). Tricksters are also often shape-shifters—a wolf may transform to a bird and then back, for instance—which entails a fitting correspondence between the slipperiness of their words and the fickleness of their outward appearance. Zenia, too, literally shape-shifts, having at some point undergone both breast augmentation and rhinoplasty; Roz also thinks about Zenia's excessive fixation on her own physical form: "If Zenia were alive there's no doubt that she'd be dieting; you don't get a waist like Zenia's without hard work. So by now she'd have chicken neck. Or else she'd be going in for surgery, more of it. She'd get a nip here, a tuck there; a lid-lift, puffed-up lips" (87). In a distinctly postmodern way, Atwood has

her trickster's shape-shifting occur surgically rather than magically. The point I would emphasize, though, is that while many fabled tricksters are literal animals or protean shape-shifters, these features may be more metaphorical with modern tricksters. That is, Zenia functions as a trickster without literally transforming into a fox. We could even say her misdeeds tend to have an animal-like caprice, unguided by reason. This is in part why Wiget includes irresponsibility in his account of the trickster's behavior.

Traditionally, tricksters are not meant to bear responsibility in the way other, more recognizably human characters are; rather, their narrative *raison d'être* is to "discombobulate" (Wiget xvi) and to stir things up, as Atwood puts it above. If, for instance, Tony's character evokes a kind of realism, given her carefully drawn humanness and her moral responsiveness throughout the novel, it is in some ways an indication of the narrative's mimetic function, or its accordance with the world as we recognize and understand it. There is no such accordance with tricksters.

Some even question whether regarding tricksters as characters, in the traditional sense, is too reductive or insufficiently nuanced. Jeanne Rosier Smith, for instance, in Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature (1997), makes the point that, "[tricksters] are not only characters, they are also rhetorical agents. They infuse narrative structure with energy, humor, and polyvalence, producing a politically radical subtext in the narrative form itself" (2). Smith's notion of tricksters as rhetorical agents is important to underscore here, as it emphasizes a trickster's distinctive narrative function. Elsewhere in her book, a study of tricksters in Native American folklore, Smith further develops this account of a trickster's narrative functionality:

Just as tricksters redefine American culture, they reinvent narrative form. The trickster's medium is words. A parodist, joker, liar, con-artist, and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words—and thus becomes author and embodiment of a fluid, flexible, and politically radical narrative form. (11)

Clearly, Smith attributes considerable significance to a trickster's presence in a narrative, but again, I want to emphasize that this significance arises largely from a trickster's basic tendency to elicit pressures, tensions, and ambiguities in a narrative. And importantly, these narrative effects are often expressive or evocative of political subtext; Smith even repeatedly calls trickster narratives politically radical. In her study of this figure's appearance in folkloric traditions, she finds that a "[trickster's] challenge to established order shows the limits of any social or political system and thereby prepares the way for creative change and adaptation. In both substance and subtext, contemporary trickster novels disrupt readers' comfortable worldviews and enable us to glimpse new possibilities" (14). Here, as with Atwood's notion of subversion and Wiget's idea of an unsettled status quo, there is again an emphasis on the trickster's role as disruptor of "established order" and "comfortable worldviews." I quote Smith at length here because her theorization of the trickster informs my reading of Zenia's narrative function. As explained at the outset of this chapter, I read Zenia's tricksterism as a kind of stress test for feminism, so situating her narrative function in relation to this larger, much older, culturally diverse canon of trickster tales helps to show the tradition Atwood draws from in creating Zenia.

The trickster, moreover, may appear and behave as a traditional character, but as Smith and Wiget and others maintain, there is indeed a categorical or typological

distinction. We overlook an essential dimension—arguably the essential dimension—of this literary figure when we read the trickster mimetically, grounding our interpretation in the same verisimilitude or realism we bring to bear upon traditional characters. For even while many well-known human versions of the trickster from literature—Twain's Huck Finn, Morrison's Sula, Bellow's Augie March—are for many intents and purposes traditional characters, their narrative function is noticeably different. Smith tries to account for this difference by emphasizing tricksters' liminality, their categorical and functional in-betweenness: "As liminal beings, tricksters dwell at crossroads and thresholds and are endlessly multifaceted and ambiguous. Tricksters are uninhibited by social constraints, free to dissolve boundaries and break taboos. Perpetual wanderers, tricksters can escape virtually any situation" (8). The best example of Zenia's liminality, I would suggest, is the lingering question of whether she somehow remains alive in the novel's narrative present, even after supposedly being "blown up during some terrorist rampage or other, in Lebanon" (12). For while Tony recalls, in the present, that "Zenia's memorial service was five years ago," shortly afterward, when the three main characters meet for their monthly lunch at the Toxique, Tony insists that Zenia is present: "Zenia is standing here, behind her, in the smoke, in the glass, in this room. Not someone who looks like Zenia: Zenia herself. [...] It's not a hallucination. The leopard-skinned waitress has seen her too" (11, 34-35). Mortal ambiguity is a fairly plain form of liminality, and is also associated with tricksterism, as Phelan explains: "Tricksters are noted for their ability to die and then show up again; even dismemberment and decomposition do not spell the end" (134). Smith, too, notes tricksters' "boundless ability to survive" (8). This

ability to reemerge after seeming death could also be associated with a trickster's supernatural prowess, as a shape-shifter, seductress, or enchantress. In transcending the natural or physical, and inhabiting this liminal space, the trickster is therefore afforded a unique narrative position from which "the dismantling of controlling ideologies becomes a key issue," as Smith puts it (12). That is, part of the reason tricksters are imbued with these strange abilities, or rendered in strange forms, is to create this liminal space in the narrative where an audience's expectations may be subverted, and where the possibility for social critique arises. As noted earlier, in some cultures the trickster's function is to disrupt conventions and cross boundaries, forms of resistance that may bear political significance. In African American folklore, for instance, there is the Br'er Rabbit trickster figure, meant as a stand-in for an enslaved African; he uses wordplay and deception to outsmart his enemies, meant as stand-ins for white slave owners. 6 Or in Native American folklore, to give just one more example, there is Wakdjunkaga, the Winnebago trickster-hero, who is abandoned by his tribe and left to wander aimlessly, before later reemerging to punish those who cast him out and aid those who objected to his treatment (Reesman xvii). Radin has described Wakdjunkaga's actions as "the mobilization of the shadow in response to suppression of the individual by society" (132). Perhaps this makes clearer Smith's idea, cited above, that tricksters' behaviors open spaces within which to envision new possibilities.

While Zenia's function is not readily analogous to Br'er Rabbit or Wakdjunkaga, there is indeed a sense where we can read Atwood's trickster in terms of these ancient narratives and begin to account for her distinctive political resonance. Like these other

tricksters, Zenia is a disruptor and transgressor, but she is not exactly suppressed. She is neither enslaved nor ostracized. Still, her backstory, however dubious and however exploitative of our credulity, would only fail to rouse compassion in the most unfeeling or cynical reader, particularly when she tells Tony the story of being forced into prostitution by her mother (181). It is important to note that Tony herself does not doubt Zenia's story. Not only does she believe Zenia, but hearing this darkest of chapters from her past has caused Tony to "admire Zenia tremendously" (184). This is yet another example of Zenia's signature power: she secures another's trust and then proceeds to leverage that trust in order to gain some advantage. But how, as this chapter claims, is Zenia's tricksterism—particularly these subtle manipulations of Tony, Charis and Roz—instrumentalized in the narrative to take on a political function, or to engender criticism? And further, how is Zenia's mischief somehow a stress test for feminism?

Before turning to address these questions, and looking closer at the female trickster's political function in Atwood's novel, I do want to address a prior question alighted on earlier in my discussion: why does so much of the research on trickster figures essentialize tricksters as male? Rather than presume this question's relevance, I would suggest that Atwood's feminization of the trickster can be read as a feminist narrative intervention: she has re-gendered a character traditionally masculinized and in doing so has complicated this notion of tricksters' essential maleness. It is no small irony, perhaps, that we have already seen this notion invoked in Atwood's own writing about tricksters, excerpted above; we see it as well in one of the passages from Wiget cited earlier. But we find that this tendency actually pervades trickster criticism and

theory. Lewis Hyde, whose book-length study of the trickster is noted above, takes up this question head-on in his 2001 essay, "Where Are the Women Tricksters?" Hyde begins his disappointingly brief essay by asserting, "[all] of the standard tricksters are male" (185). He bases this claim on three main premises:

First, these tricksters may belong to patriarchal mythologies [where] the prime actors [...] are male. Second, there may be a problem with the standard itself; there may be female tricksters who have simply been ignored. Finally, it may be that the trickster stories articulate some distinction between men and women, so that even in a matriarchal setting this figure would be male. (185)

While all three of these premises are problematic in some way, I want to focus primarily on premise two, as it is here, I would suggest, where Hyde runs into the most trouble. Rather than dismiss this "standard" as explicitly sexist and likely under-researched, he either admits his own ignorance or surprisingly invokes a more general ignorance within trickster scholarship, in acknowledging that female tricksters may indeed exist but, for reasons unexplained, have failed to attract scholarly attention. Before long, Hyde brings up Baubo, a female figure—either a queen or nurse, depending on the source material with origins in Greek Eleusinian mystery religion (186). Hyde spends a little space tracing appearances of Baubo in Greek myth and poetry before saying, almost pedantically, that she is a "female figure of great antiquity [...] whose shamelessness is linked with fertility and the return of the dead," and that her traits are sufficient to warrant association with "the trickster's mythological territory" (186). Hyde also, thankfully, evinces familiarity with at least one academic researcher, Franchot Ballinger, who has written about female tricksters. Ballinger's work on the Coyote trickster in Hopi and Tewa folklore, Hyde explains, has brought to light several stories where Coyote is

female (188). Still, though, Hyde is quick to disqualify these examples, stating that "Ballinger found no stories in which the female Coyote is a culture hero. She is not known as a thief of fire, a teacher of dances, or an inventor of fish traps" (188).

Apparently, Hyde has already forgotten the "problem" described in his second premise and seems keener on sustaining the trickster's masculinization than considering, in a more rigorous way, how and why this figure is at times feminized.

Hyde's promisingly titled essay is all the more problematic given that only three years before he wrote it, Lori Landay published *Madcaps, Screwballs, & Con Women:*The Female Trickster in American Culture (1998), which offers a wonderful survey of female tricksters in American literature, television, film and popular culture, all the while drawing important connections between these contemporary art forms and the trickster narrative traditions that continue to influence and inform them. In Landay's introduction, she explains how Scheherazade, one of the major storytellers from the medieval Arabic folktale compilation One Thousand and One Nights, is a strong example of a female trickster from antiquity. Scheherazade, the daughter of an aristocrat, has benefited from her father's high social position and for three years has avoided being forced into marriage to King Shahryar, who "married a [different] woman every evening and had her executed the next morning [as a] response to his first wife's infidelity" (Landay 1).

Scheherazade's tricksterism consists in her masterful storytelling and her ability to outsmart an evil king and avoid execution, as Landay explains:

When you put yourself in the mythic Scheherazade's situation, you enter the terrain of the female trickster. [...] The story goes that on her wedding night she begged the king to send for her sister, who asked her to tell a story. She began, and told tales the whole night through. But as she saw that the dawn was

approaching, she cleverly grew silent. Shahryar, unwilling to have the story unfinished, did not send for the executioner. [...] By suspending the narrative before the end, she saved her life again and again. (1)

So here we have an example of a patriarchal culture's mythic narrative, where a shrewd female trickster outsmarts a powerful male. It seems that the female trickster, as a feminist *provocateur*, has been around at least as long as this medieval Arabic folktale, which may come as a surprise to Hyde, who towards the end of his essay arrives at the general conclusion that "canonical tricksters are male because they are part of patriarchal mythology" (189). Scheherazade, by this measure, is neither canonical nor a trickster. Notice, though, in Landay's excellent account of Scheherazade's tricksterism, how sufficiently this character accords with this chapter's preceding discussion of the trickster's most salient features:

By tricking Shahryar to capture his interest, Scheherazade is a tightrope walker, poised ironically in the liminal space 'betwixt and between' night and day, life and death, victim and survivor, concubine and wife. She transforms her position as rape and murder victim into that of an enchantress who keeps [the king] interested, indeed fascinated by her stories [...] All the while she instructs him on a way of behaving that is more appropriate than the nightly violation and daily murder of women. (1-2)

Like the tricksters Atwood and others describe above, Scheherazade is wily and manipulative; she is positioned in a liminal space within her narrative; she shape-shifts her position in order to gain advantage; and she is an enchanting storyteller. All of these could also be said of Zenia, incidentally. It seems, moreover, that while the tricksters found in canonical folklore and myth, across cultures and history, are predominantly male, this is insufficient proof that somehow *all* standard tricksters are male, as Hyde claims. What it suggests, rather, is that female tricksters have indeed been ignored, as

Hyde also claims, and that a book like Landay's is both overdue and groundbreaking. My own approach to Zenia's tricksterism, in the next section, is informed by Landay's assertion that "[in] order to identify female tricksters [...] we must turn from the margins of dominant society to the centers of women's space," which often take the form of female friendship in the novel (3). But I would suggest that women's psychic lives—their memories, sensibilities, or traumatic experiences—are another prominent space Atwood constructs, and Zenia's extensive infiltration of and interference with this space is perhaps the best example of her tricksterism.

## Feminist Ambivalence

In beginning this section, I want to again briefly mention Wakdjunkaga, specifically Radin's idea that this figure's tricksterism may serve to illuminate obscured forms of suppression in society. Whereas Wakdjunkaga mobilizes this particular shadow so that others may better observe injustice in society, Zenia's tricksterism, I argue, casts a shadow of feminism's negation, where friendship, solidarity and trust among women are either betrayed or exploited. In this way, Zenia's tricksterism allows for a more critical awareness of feminism's *positive* function as a bearer of community, intimacy and unity. As explained earlier in this chapter, Tony, Roz, and Charis are a testament to feminism's success, insofar as it has enhanced women's institutional, cultural and economic power. I read these characters as emblems of feminism, in that they represent female companionship, camaraderie and social cohesion. Zenia, on the other hand, represents a contempt for and cynicism towards these forms of sociality, and is often described as solitary and predatory. Tolan reads this distinction between Zenia's rugged, unsparing

individualism and the others' more group-oriented collectivism as a dramatization of the tensions between postfeminism and feminism (50). Framing these tensions in this way is helpful, as it lends an historical and philosophical dimension to a question posed earlier: in which ways is *The Robber Bride* a commentary on feminism's resilience amid internecine conflict? Rene Denfeld, author of *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995), published only two years after Atwood's novel, attributes this conflict to a generational divide. Denfeld purports to speak on behalf of a rather large group even as she disavows group solidarity, writing that "notions of sisterhood seldom appeal to women of my generation" (263). This, we notice, is a departure from older, more traditional feminist thinking, which tends to value female community, or sisterhood. Robin Morgan's 1970 feminist anthology, in fact, is plainly titled *Sisterhood is Powerful*.

While I agree with Tolan that the novel's political subtext is in part expressive of a feminism/postfeminism tension, where earlier feminist thought is more group-oriented than postfeminism's greater focus on personal ambition, I also think there is more to be said about Atwood's engagement with feminism in the novel. In focusing more directly on the novel's adoption of the trickster figure, I read the novel instead as a representation of feminism under duress or interrogation, where the trickster's narrative function provokes questions about feminism's viability, coherence and ongoing relevance. Since Tony, Roz and Charis are each in their own relation to feminism, feminism itself is shown to be flexible and expansive, able to accommodate and absorb an ever-diverse community of women. Zenia, too, bears relation to feminism: her high degree of self-

esteem, her sexual agency, her refusal to flatter and pander to men, and her career ambition all accord with traditional feminist ideals. This is why it is necessary to revise my earlier statement: Zenia's tricksterism casts a shadow that somehow contains, paradoxically, both a negation and affirmation of feminism. For instance, Zenia's sexual agency can represent, on the one hand, feminism's successful intervention in dating and romantic coupling mores underwritten by patriarchy; on the other, her sexual conquests, while satisfying for her, tend to come at the expense of disrupting other women's lives and relationships, thereby straining bonds between women. This contradiction—a representation of feminism as at once salubrious and detrimental for women—amounts to a paradox: feminism is neither entirely one nor the other but somehow both. And again, I would suggest that one of the novel's most productive elements is this vexed, paradoxical representation of feminism, where women's relation to feminism is shown to be variable, unstable and at times conflicted.

In what follows, then, I offer close readings of Zenia's relationships with Tony, Roz and Charis, while also further explaining this function of her tricksterism, where her actions create a liminal space for feminist disorder or conflict to emerge. By foregrounding these tensions within feminism, the novel performs what I have suggested is a narrative stress test; that is, the question of feminism's durability is narrativized. In having Zenia act as a sort of narrative cudgel, locating points of vulnerability within and among the three main characters, and then subjecting these vulnerabilities to undue burdens and tensions, Atwood's trickster figure comes to function as a rhetorical agent, implying a primary question: is the solidarity among women, engendered by feminism,

sufficient to withstand internecine conflict? Secondarily, might the novel also prefigure what Andrea O'Reilly has called a "matricentric feminism," which treats motherhood and mothering as central to women's social progress (14)? Insofar as Charis emerges from her traumatic past more keenly alert to children's vulnerabilities, with her two close female friends offering care and support, the novel indeed evokes this idea of a feminism centered upon mothering as a practice with the power to engender progress and empowerment for women. O'Reilly explains that a matricentric feminism "regards mothering as a socially engaged enterprise and a site of power, wherein mothers can and do create social change through childrearing and activism" (18). In the sections for each character that follow, I look first at how each becomes susceptible to Zenia's tricksterism, before returning to this question of a matricentric feminism in the novel. Ultimately, we will see further how the trickster figure becomes an instrument of critique, provoking a more refined understanding of women's relationships and social conditions, and also opening a liminal space in the narrative to explore feminist ambivalence and paradox. Tony

Tony is the first of the three to meet Zenia. Their initial encounter, in the late 1960s when Tony is only nineteen, is likened to the traditional vampiric invitation myth: "Tony was the first one to let her in, because people like Zenia can never step through your doorway, can never enter and entangle themselves in your life, unless you invite them" (127). In recalling her earliest memories of their relationship, Tony also thinks about how Zenia would ask to borrow money she never intended to pay back and how she came to recognize Zenia's ruse later on: "What [Tony] finds embarrassing now is that

she so naively, so tamely, so obligingly forked over" (133). It is quickly established, moreover, that there is an underhandedness in Zenia's treatment of Tony; it is also clear that Zenia provokes a deep, consuming sense of inadequacy in Tony: "In the presence of Zenia [Tony] feels more than small and absurd: she feels non-existent" (140). Still, Tony is drawn to her. To the others in McClung Hall, the college dormitory where Tony lives and Zenia spends an increasing amount of time, the two are "thick as thieves" (147).

Tony's attraction to Zenia, though, needs to be understood in terms of Tony's past, particularly her tragic childhood and her persistent sense of incompleteness. As a child, Tony had a "sense that part of her was missing," in part because she imagined she had a monozygotic twin sibling who died during pregnancy (153). Her mother, Anthea, was strangely abusive, subjecting Tony to an arbitrary prohibition against using her left hand, in spite of Tony's emerging ambidexterity. Anthea's only explanation was that "the world was not constructed for the left-handed" (153). At elementary school, she was even physically abused and humiliated by her teachers, who "would slap her left hand or hit it with rulers," trying to impose a default right-handedness (153). This forced restriction of her hand use was especially unsettling for Tony because she tends to associate her ambidexterity with possibly being a twin: "[When] Tony grew up and learned more about left-handedness she was faced with the possibility that she might have been a twin, the left-handed half of a divided egg, the other half of which had died" (153). As she thinks more about these early school years, we begin to see that the ambidexterity has a deeper, almost existential meaning for Tony: "[She] wrote her outer name with her right hand and her other name, her inner one, with her left; although, she

was forbidden to write with her left hand, or to do anything else of importance with it" (153). Even as a child, Tony fixates on doubleness or binaries—left/right, outer/inner, twin embryos—and this becomes a general trope associated with her character. Her penchant for spelling reversals and palindromes as well can be read as a kind of doubleness since a word's mirror image appears as an inverted duplicate, or twin.

Coupled with this private, at times pained contemplation of her identity, Tony also grew up in a tense, loveless home environment. She remembers a lack of marital affection between Anthea and her father, Griff, and that they both seemed unhappy. In one memory, while Tony sat on the floor and her father worked in his study, Griff seemed to her "hurtling down towards the target of his [work]," "frowning, as if braced for impact" and "Tony [was] dimly aware that he [wasn't] happy [...] He never complain[ed] about not having [happiness]; unlike her mother" (158). Tony also recalls spending a lot of time away from their house with Anthea, though not necessarily in ways that brought them closer. She remembers being "dragged downtown" by Anthea on daylong shopping sprees so her mother could buy clothes for herself, but hardly ever for Tony: "Anthea doesn't often buy clothes for Tony; she says she could dress Tony in a potato sack and Tony wouldn't notice. But Tony does notice, she notices a great deal. She just doesn't think it would make any difference whether she wore a potato sack or not. Any difference to Anthea, that is" (154, 155). Anthea also only seems interested in Tony's piano playing if it momentarily relieves her of her parental duties: "[Tony] plays on, banging the [piano] keys down to show her mother how studious she is. 'That's enough for today, don't you think, Tony?' her mother says gaily. Tony is puzzled:

usually Anthea wants her to practise as long as possible. She wants her safely occupied, somewhere out of the way" (155). Even more sadly, Anthea's affectionate gestures, when they do occur, ring hollow or insincere, as when she sits beside Tony on her piano bench, intoxicated, and tells her daughter she loves her:

"I want you to know," she says, "that Mother truly, truly loves you." Tony pulls back within herself. Anthea has said this before. When she says it her breath smells the way it does now, of smoke and of the empty glasses left on the kitchen counter in the mornings after parties, and on other mornings as well. [...] She never says "I truly, truly love you." It's always *Mother*, as if Mother is someone else. (156)

Anthea's use of the third person in this moment creates more distance than intimacy, but Tony's reaction, her retreating within herself, suggests that she has by this point inured herself to her mother's inability to offer genuine affection. Tony recalls an even earlier memory, at age five, where Anthea took her tobogganing and ended up abandoning her small daughter on a hillside: "Before Tony knew what was happening her mother had picked up the toboggan and run with it to the brink of the hill [...] There she threw it on the snow [...] and went [off] at an astonishing speed [...] Her mother was going away from her, she was vanishing, and Tony would be left alone on the cold hill" (152). This image of young Tony by herself atop a snowy hillside, "terrified" and unsure what to do, is an unfortunate symbol of her relationship with Anthea (152). In these scattered, unpleasant glimpses of their relationship, we find that in place of filial warmth there was neglect and eventually desertion, as Anthea one day suddenly leaves Tony and Griff. From that point, she is only seen again in pictures she sends and later dies tragically while diving off the coast of Baja California (173).

While just these experiences with her mother are deeply traumatic and sufficient to understand Tony's struggles with intimacy as an adult, she is also scarred by her father, as many of her recollections attest to. A World War II veteran and part of the notoriously grim D-Day landing at Normandy, Griff emerges from that experience understandably guarded. He evades Tony's questions about the war, "as if there's a sore place on him that he must protect [which he] will keep her from putting her hand on" (161). Griff has some type of life insurance job, but he doesn't speak about it: "He keeps on doing whatever he does," thought Tony (162). After Anthea had been gone for a period, Griff unexpectedly donates her closetful of clothes left behind to the Salvation Army. Since the full closet suggested, for Tony, that Anthea would indeed return, and since "[she] was in the habit of checking the closet every few days," having them suddenly disappear from their home was especially hard on Tony, as it made the reality of Anthea's absence more real: "Tony said nothing about it, but she knew. Anthea would not be coming back" (171). Griff's unfatherly behaviors worsen: he doesn't buy Tony Christmas presents; he becomes an alcoholic; while drunk, he violently chases Tony through their house; and at one point he calls her "the catastrophe in his life" (174). This tumultuous period culminates in still greater tragedy, when Griff commits suicide on the day of Tony's high school graduation (175).

Significantly, many of these details from Tony's childhood arrive in the narrative as they are shared with Zenia. In looking back at her willingness to confide in Zenia, Tony recalls that "[she] opened the door wide, and in came Zenia, like a long-lost friend, like a wind, and Tony welcomed her" (127). It is actually West, Tony's college crush

and later romantic partner, who introduces her to Zenia, and it isn't long before Zenia begins her curious "interrogations" of Tony, as the two begin meeting frequently for coffee (145). Zenia's sudden, eager interest in her personal history flatters and enlivens Tony; it even makes her "dizzy" (148). Tony is so affected by the keen attention Zenia offers her, so absorbed by this seeming intimacy, that she quickly comes to regard Zenia as her "best [and] only friend" (177). What gradually becomes apparent, though, is that this attention Zenia gives Tony is actually a kind of reconnaissance, a strategic gathering of valuable information. The more Zenia comes to know about Tony, as well as the others, the better positioned she is to prey upon her vulnerabilities. In particular, Zenia recognizes Tony's enduring sense of "motherlessness," the trauma from losing her primary female figure (168). We recall that in the immediate aftermath of Anthea running away, young Tony is so severely distressed that she quickly begins fantasizing about Ethel, their housekeeper, becoming a maternal figure: "What [Tony] wanted was for Ethel to take her in her knobbly arms, and stroke her hair and rock her, and tell her that everything would be all right. Ethel, who had bulgy blue veins on her legs, who smelled of sweat and Javex, whom she didn't even like! But who might have been capable of providing comfort, of a sort" (169). Tony also reacts to Anthea's departure with guilt, as if she somehow drove her mother away:

All of this is her own fault, somehow. She hasn't made enough cups of tea, she's misread the signals, she has let go of the string or the rope or chain or whatever it is that's been attaching her mother to this house, holding her in place, and like an escaped sailboat or a balloon her mother has come loose. (167)

This experience of losing her mother, moreover, is a formative event for Tony; it is terrifying, incomprehensible and guilt-ridden. It may also help to explain why, in adulthood, she is drawn to "clear outcomes" and the "power of explanations," as they offer a stability taken from her as a child (4).

For Zenia, though, Tony's trauma is something to consume and exploit. In the spirit of the mythic robber bridegroom, Zenia engages in trickery so that she may lure and ultimately rob Tony. Specifically, when Zenia learns about this trauma, she is afforded greater access to Tony's psychic space and can take measure of her receptivity. This is why it is only *after* Tony has shared so much about her childhood trauma that Zenia begins crafting a story of her own past that is so terrible and so shocking that it makes Tony's misfortunes seem tame by comparison. Donna Potts, as well, has noticed how Zenia seems to calibrate her fiction in a way that virtually trivializes Tony's traumatic experiences:

Despite Tony's own troubled past—featuring a mother who abandons her as a child and an alcoholic father who commits suicide following her high school graduation—she feels that it can never rival Zenia's past; measured against the more cosmopolitan Zenia, she feels unprepared to confront the world. When Zenia claims her mother was a White Russian, who began renting Zenia out to men when she was nine, Tony feels 'ignorant as an egg.' (288)

Zenia's story is so breathtakingly awful that Tony even thinks to herself that her "own little history has dwindled considerably," that it is now reduced to a "footnote" (184). She is also "electrified" by Zenia's yarns: the tales of Russian refugeeism, forced prostitution, and her mother's tuberculosis (182). Tony begins to feel deeper affinity with Zenia, as she believes they are both orphans, but she also begins to admire Zenia more deeply, privately admitting to herself she wishes she were more like her (185).

Zenia's trickster tales gradually disarm Tony, arousing her compassion and respect, and they also belittle Tony's suffering. Potts' comments are again useful here: "Zenia tricks all three friends into alternately pitying and idolizing her by playing on their sense that there is nothing inherently terrifying, fascinating, or even notable about where they come from [...] As a result, the three friends are denied an essential component of personal identity" (290). I would add that Tony's lack of, and need for, female intimacy increases her susceptibility to Zenia's impact. That is, having grown up without a close female relative or friend, Tony is understandably enthralled by this prospect for female intimacy. Atwood hints at this is by having Tony one night mistake Zenia for her mother: "On a Friday in early April, Zenia climbs in through Tony's bedroom window in the middle of the night. Tony doesn't see her do it because she's asleep; but suddenly her eyes open and she sits up straight in her bed, and there's a woman standing in the darkness of the room [...] In the instant of waking Tony thinks it's her mother" (190). This scene is reminiscent of a child waking from a nightmare and seeking a parent's comfort, which Tony may have done on occasion after Anthea left. The waking child is disoriented, and the fear from the dream may linger, which indeed happens for Tony. She remembers going "cold all over" and then feeling a "complex wave of recognition and dread, shock and the lack of it [...], too paralyzed to scream" (190). In this moment, Tony's trauma revisits her, and it is associated now with Zenia's arrival. Also, her mistaking of Zenia for Anthea naturally invites closer attention to places where Tony's feelings towards Zenia are described in terms that evoke her relationship with her mother. One example is how the guilt Tony feels from Anthea running away—guilt that is, of course, already

misplaced—gets projected onto Zenia. We recall that one of Tony's reactions to Anthea leaving is to assume that had she done more for her mother, she could have somehow willed her to stay. In a way typical of traumatized children, Tony blames herself, and she also fears abandonment. So when Zenia, as someone offering female companionship and connection, begins making requests of Tony, perhaps it is not so surprising how eager she is to respond, if Zenia has become for Tony a replacement for the lost maternal object.

Once Zenia has secured this dynamic in her relationship with Tony, where Tony's instinct to give to her overwhelms any misgivings she may have, she can proceed to trick and rob Tony in more tangible ways. Tony thinks to herself, "[under] the circumstances, what can [she] withhold [from Zenia]? Not very much" (186). She lends Zenia a considerable amount of money—"the odd twenty, the odd fifty, the odd hundred"—with no expectation of being reimbursed: "how is Zenia to pay it back, things being what they are?" (186). Tony writes Zenia's history term paper for her, against her better judgment: "She does this nervously: she knows it's highly risky. She's stepping over a line, a line she respects" (187). But perhaps most significantly, Zenia robs Tony of West. West is far from being an exemplary romantic partner to Tony, but she genuinely cares for him, and their relationship does bring her to a period where she is "happier than she's ever been" (198). After Tony and West marry, and their lives become more settled and domesticated, Zenia arrives out of thin air one evening, and as has been made very clear by this point, West's infatuation with Zenia is his Achilles heel (199). This is why he promptly runs away with Zenia, his old college flame, not long after she reemerges in their lives, and does not return for nearly a year (209). When West eventually shows up

at Tony's door, of her new home, he is not in a good way: "[Tony] could tell from the colour of his skin, which was a light greenish grey, and from his sagging shoulders and dejected mouth [that he'd] been dismissed, sacked, ejected" (210). This dalliance with Zenia, and whatever drew him to it, seems to exact a long toll on West, as many years later, Tony still regards him as "frangible, [...] subject to breakage" (10). So even while, after considerable time, Tony does manage to recover some of the joy she lost, acknowledging in the novel's present that she is "happy in a more general way, [...] happy that West is on this earth at all, and in [her] house, and that he goes to sleep every night beside her," she remains haunted by Zenia (7). In Tony's present life, Zenia's name still "evoke[s] the old sense of outrage, of humiliation and confused pain [and] she finds it hard to believe that Zenia is really dead [and] keeps expecting her to turn up, stroll in through some unlocked door" (11). This is why, of course, Zenia's wraithlike reappearance at the Toxique, hallucinatory or otherwise, occasions such distress for Tony.

What I would suggest, moreover, from the perspective of narrative strategy and technique, is that Atwood makes female intimacy and companionship—areas of great interest for feminism—points of attack for Zenia's tricksterism. That is, Tony's traumatic backstory is revealed to Zenia, who is then in a position to more effectively beguile, entrap and steal. Zenia's tricksterism, apparent in the disingenuous attention and interest she offers Tony, exploits Tony's history of abandonment and loss; it also mocks her need for female intimacy. This swift devastation wrought by Zenia's tricksterism is indeed a kind of ambush, which may hint at Tony's motivation later on, in her academic

career, for choosing to specialize in historical ambushes. If an ambush, in Tony's words, is an abrupt "definitive moment," marked by chaos and uncertainty, then this is a term we could use to describe Zenia's plot against Tony (4). Still, for as much as Zenia is depicted as a wily aggressor, as an ambusher, the dread Tony feels towards her is strangely mixed with desire. Upon believing that Zenia has somehow returned from the dead, Tony thinks to herself that "[in] order to defeat Zenia she will have to become Zenia," which follows an earlier moment where Tony "sees [in Zenia] her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be" (211, 185). Tolan as well has noticed this ambivalence, not just in Tony but in all three main characters: "Zenia is threatening and disruptive, but by depicting Tony, Roz and Charis's response to her in [...] terms of a competing fear and desire, Atwood [...] points to an ambiguity easily overlooked" (54). These competing sentiments, in my opinion, align with the novel's similarly ambivalent representation of the three women's relation to feminism. For Tony, her ambivalence towards Zenia consists of longing tinged with dismay, and admiration tinged with disgust. In this way, Zenia again and again comes to inhabit the trickster's liminal space, where she functions as an object of both desire and repulsion, as a paradoxical figure. Tolan adds that Zenia's liminality situates her "as both Self and Other [raising] questions about feminism's dual situation as both a reactionary backlash [...] and equally as a liberal politics that many late twentieth century women are increasingly identifying with" (46). Zenia—Atwood's trickster feminist—indeed has this dual, at times ambiguous function: she is at once beautiful and monstrous; her speech is deceptive. We see examples of this as well in Zenia's relationships with Roz and Charis.

Roz.

Unlike Tony, Roz "scarcely knew Zenia [in college], except as an object of gossip. Lurid, sensational gossip" (350). Years later, in the 1980s, while having lunch with her husband, Mitch, Roz has a chance encounter with Zenia, who is working at the restaurant as a waitress. Zenia explains that she is now a freelance journalist, currently "commissioned to do a piece on sexual harassment in the workplace," a feminist-oriented topic that piques Roz's interest (349). While this scene is important, on the one hand, because Roz introduces Mitch to Zenia, who he will eventually run away with, its main importance is to show Zenia positioning herself to ambush Roz. Before this brief encounter ends, Zenia claims to have a personal connection to Roz's father: "He saved my life," says Zenia. "During the war" (350). This catches Roz by surprise; she is "unwilling to believe," either because it is odd not to have known this about her own father or because she remembers Tony's admonition, "Zenia lies" (350, 401). Whichever it is, Roz is clearly enthralled by the possibility of hearing this story about her father; if genuine, it may alleviate some of the suspicion and ambiguity surrounding his past. Roz thinks.

this is what she's longed for always—an eyewitness, someone involved but impartial, who could assure her that her father really was what he was rumored to be: a hero. Or a semi-hero; at any rate, more than a shady trader. She's heard accounts from others, her uncles for instance, but the two of them were hardly reliable; so she's never been really sure, not really. (350)

Her reaction here, to this prospect of new evidence of her father's valor or goodness, is notably melancholic, seeming to arise from old, unresolved conflict in their relationship. It bothers Roz, for instance, that Zenia has this valuable knowledge rather than her: "It's

as if her father left something in his will, some treasure, to a perfect stranger, some drifter he'd met in a bar, and nothing for his own daughter. Didn't he know how much she wanted to know?" (351). For Zenia, of course, this story about Roz's father is carefully chosen bait, something used to first capture Roz's attention and ultimately her patronage. This is why, as they finish chatting in the restaurant, Zenia "moves confidently, nonchalantly, as if she knows she's just made the one offer Roz can't possibly refuse" (351).

As with Tony's vulnerabilities, Roz's as well have a significant history and relate to her parents. An air of mystery surrounds Roz's father; in thinking back on their relationship, Roz calls him "the Great Unknown. Great to others, unknown to her" (352). During World War II, and for some time afterward, Roz's parents owned a "rooming house," inherited from her grandmother, but Roz's father was strangely absent for much of this period (353). Roz was only told that he was "[on] his way," when she asked her mother where he was (353). He was gone so often that Roz "had no real memory of him," which allowed space, in Roz's childhood imagination, for her to fantasize about his being a kind of clandestine special operative during the war (354). In looking at the one photo her mother has of him, Roz thinks it "revealed none of the magic [she] ascribed to her father. He was important, he was doing important, secret things that could not be spoken about. They were war things, even though the war was over" (354). Later on, of course, it is revealed that Roz's father was involved in international crime during the war, chiefly plundering and smuggling. But here, in this tender moment of her youth, Roz isn't yet aware of her father's activities, told by her mother only that he is somewhere

"[risking] his neck" (354). Her father's main contact with Roz and her mother during this time is through letters, though her mother keeps their seemingly upsetting contents private: "Her mother read these letters to herself, turning an odd shade of mottled pink while she did it" (354). Even though she isn't allowed to hear her father's words, Roz nevertheless "saved the stamps" from the letters, deepening our sense of her longing for him (354).

During this prolonged, intermittent absence of her father, Roz is also first made aware of her identity in unpleasant, discriminatory ways. In the novel's present, while reflecting on her ethnic background, Roz thinks to herself that there "are many boats in her ancestral past" and that "[everyone] she's descended from got kicked out of somewhere else, for being too poor or too politically uncouth or for having the wrong profile or accent or hair" (338). These hints of Roz's otherness, as a "dark skin" child of immigrants in 1950s Toronto, are more plainly visible when she begins to attend a parochial school, where immigrant children are singled out and bullied; they're called "DPs," or Displaced Persons (359). Roz is at times called a DP, due to her dark complexion, but she also fights back: "If Roz could get [DPs] cornered, and if they weren't too much bigger than she was, she would give them a Chinese burn [...] Or else she would kick them, or else she would yell back. She had a temper, said the nuns" (359-360). I would suggest that Roz's childhood temper, in addition to being a natural response to bullying, may also arise from a deeper sense of alienation. Roz thinks to herself that there is "something about her that set her apart, an invisible barrier, faint and

hardly there [...] Roz didn't know what it was but she could feel it. She wasn't like the others, she was among them but she wasn't part of them" (360).

Clearly, some of this is a reaction to being othered. Roz's dark skin and hair, her Jewishness, and her immigrant parents are remarked upon by her classmates. But this inexplicable barrier she feels could be more existential, taking into account the postcolonial concept of ambivalence, notably developed in Homi Bhabha's *The Location* of Culture (1994). While Roz's alienation, from a historical perspective, is closer associated with diaspora than colonialism, given her mixed Jewish ancestry and her awareness of her ancestors being "kicked out," Bhabha's work is nevertheless helpful here, as it speaks to Roz's experience (338). In giving an account of postcolonial subjectivity, particularly in the West, Bhabha describes the postcolonial subject's riven, doubled experience, marked by uneasiness and alienation (127). There is a feeling of "almost but not quite" (Bhabha 129) among marginalized groups, an inability to feel truly at home. For Roz, this describes her experience at her Catholic school, where she is told she's "not a real Catholic" by Julia Warden, her classmate (364). Julia also calls attention to Roz's absent father: "Where's your father anyways? My Mum says he's a DP" (364). In one fell swoop, her classmate refers to Roz's father with a racist slur and also reminds her of his unpleasant absence. Some of Roz's alienation, I would suggest, is attributable to this doubled sense of uncertainty: she questions both her identity and her father's whereabouts. As a point of connection to her ancestry and cultural identity, and as the parent "she adored," her father may be in a position to remove some of Roz's uncertainty and provide the affection she seeks (376).

When Roz's father finally returns, though, it does not alleviate her sense of alienation. He returns in the middle of the night, while Roz sleeps, and asks to be called "Papa," which Roz strangely associates with their otherness: "Roz looks around: who is this Papa? Then she understands that he means himself. It's true, what Julia Warden said: her father is a DP. She can tell by the way he talks" (367). His return brings other changes Roz does not fully understand, some that bear upon this ambivalence in her identity. For instance, Roz's parents begin using her real name again, "Roz Grunwald," in lieu of the more Anglo sounding "Rosalind Greenwood," which they called her during the war (380). Roz's actual name, her parents explain to her, "was too Jewish" (380). Also, instead of continuing on with Catholic schools, as she reaches her teenage years, Roz begins attending the more urbane sounding Forest Hill Collegiate Institute, and she again feels her identity shifting: "She's no longer a Catholic: she's renounced all that not without qualms, not without residue—in favour of being a Jew. Since there are clearly sides, she would rather be on that one" (380). Interestingly, whereas Roz begins to take her newfound, keener sense of identity seriously, her parents seem only interested in Jewish identity as a social signifier, not the actual culture:

[Roz] reads up on [Jewish culture] because she wants to do it right; then she asks her father to buy two sets of dishes, and refuses to eat bacon. Her father buys the dishes to humour her, but her mother won't separate the meat dishes from the milk ones, and gives her a wounded look if she brings it up. Nor will her father join a temple. (380)

Roz's desire for an unambiguous, stabilizing cultural identity is not shared by her parents, perhaps because her young age simply makes her more prone to this need. But even with her new cultural bearings in place, Roz's alienation persists: "whereas once [she] was not

Catholic enough, now she isn't Jewish enough. She's an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person" (380-381). Bhabha's insight into cultural ambivalence is again helpful here. In writing about displaced persons and identities, he explains that their ambivalence produces a sense of "excess or slippage," of having only a "partial presence," "both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'" (124). Like the postcolonial subject, whose identity, Bhabha explains, "problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the 'national' is no longer naturalizable," Roz's inability to fully inhabit a single identity, mired in partiality or excess, is similarly problematic (125). She sees her native Canada as a "foreign country" and see herself as an "immigrant, a displaced person" (381).

As the account of Roz's childhood nears its end, it becomes clearer that her adolescent identity crisis is entwined with her complicated relationship with her father. She learns that one of the tenants at their boarding house, Mrs. Morley, was in fact her father's mistress, which elicits a curious response from Roz:

Mrs. Morley hadn't had the establishment or the refinement and her beauty had been a matter of opinion, but at least she'd had the clothes, and Roz wanted to give her father some credit: he wouldn't have gone for just any old easy lay. She wanted to be proud of him. She knew her mother was in the right and her father was in the wrong; she knew her mother had been virtuous [...] and had been treated with ingratitude. But it was an ingratitude Roz shared. Maybe her father was a scoundrel, but he was the one she adored. (375-376)

Roz effectively pardons her father's infidelity, acknowledging what he did was wrong but also making it clear that her adoration for him supersedes any indignation. There is also a strange asymmetry in her filial affections, this "ingratitude" directed only at her mother. Roz's need to be proud of her father is so strong that she forgives him while projecting unwarranted disdain at her mother. She even reveals that Mrs. Morley "was not [her

father's] only mistress" and refers to her parents' marriage unromantically, as an "arrangement" she doesn't entirely understand (376). She also doesn't understand how one day, "out of thin air," her family comes into a "lot of money," her father's only explanation being that their "ship came in" (379). Roz, though, in her typical way of restraining any suspicion of her father, again casts a positive light on his behavior. She imagines their sudden wealth could only have arrived in "an old-fashioned ship like a galleon, a treasure ship, its golden sails in the sunlight, pennants flying from its masts" (379). Her need to regard him as "noble," as a kind of swashbuckling war hero, overrides her better judgment (379).

Years later, after Roz is married, she finally learns the ignoble truth about her father's profits, as one of her "uncles" explains that he was a "fixer" during the war, which suggests criminality (385). "Uncle George," as Roz calls him, admits that her father was a "crook" but somehow also a "hero," though it is difficult to determine whether he says this to protect Roz's gallant image of her father or if there was indeed something heroic in his wartime activities (385). Since this revelation provokes a new anxiety in her, as she now worries that her inheritance from her parents is "dirty money," Roz's ambivalence reemerges (386). Here, her ambivalence is more attributable to this possibility that her family's wealth was ill-gotten than to lingering uneasiness about her cultural identity, but I would argue that the two remain intertwined. Roz's persistent uneasiness is neither fully attributable to her proximity to war crimes nor to her feeling like a "strange half-person" (381). It is, rather, a layered form of intergenerational trauma, a byproduct of diaspora, antisemitism, cultural hybridity, war, and family

separation. At one point, for instance, as she's given conflicting accounts of her father's nationality and his business dealings, Roz "has the feeling that someone has been lying to her, [not] just about her father: about the war too, and about God," and she resolves "not to think about any of it anymore because it's too sad and confusing" (371). This sadness and confusion, we could say, are the textures of Roz's trauma, which continues to affect her long after she marries Mitch, becomes a parent, and purchases a majority stake in a women's magazine. None of these gives her the pride or closure that has continued to elude her, as she reflects on here:

[Roz] wanted to be proud of her father. Her flawed father, her cunning father, her father the fixer, her father the crook. She'd told little bits of his war story when people were interviewing her for magazine profiles [...] but even while she was telling about him, her father the hero, her father the rescuer, she knew she was sprucing him up, shining a good light on him, pinning posthumous medals onto his chest. (392-393)

This question of her father's character and conduct, and of the means by which he secured his family's wealth, remains unresolved. This may explain why when Zenia appears in the restaurant that day, offering a first-hand account of her father's heroism, Roz acts as though Zenia is in a position to effectively vindicate him: "[This] is what [Roz has] longed for always—an eyewitness, someone involved but impartial, who could assure her that her father really was what he was rumored to be: a hero. Or a semi-hero; at any rate, more than a shady trader" (350). As a trickster, Zenia is able to mysteriously discern Roz's vulnerabilities and to disarm her with storytelling. The question of whether Zenia was even really saved by Roz's father is less important here than noticing how Zenia somehow knows exactly which allurement to dangle before Roz, just as she does with Tony.

Zenia's harrowing account of narrowly avoiding capture by Nazis in Berlin, just before the war, has an almost cinematic intrigue. She explains to Roz how, as a sixmonth old baby, she was suddenly left with a neighbor, as her parents were "taken away" (398). The neighbor soon united Zenia with her paternal aunt, who lived nearby. Zenia says she "was the only one saved"; her two older siblings were less fortunate (398). Curiously, when Zenia interrupts her story to show Roz a photo of her family, as if presenting evidence to a jury, Roz is immediately suspicious that the photo could have really been taken when Zenia claims:

What amazes Roz is how contemporary they look: the knee-high skirts on the women, from the late twenties? the early thirties?—the smart hats, the makeup, it could be the retro look, in some fashion magazine, right now. Only the clothes of the children are archaic; that, and their haircuts [...] The smiles are a little tight, but smiles were, in those days. (398)

Roz's suspicions, though, are offset by her need for this story to be authentic, as she quickly begins reconciling any oddness in the photo: "It must have been a special occasion: a vacation, a religious holiday, somebody's birthday" (398). Just as Roz is eager to hear and believe this story, Zenia is eager to suspend any lurking disbelief in Roz and make sure the story captivates—or sufficiently tricks—her. For instance, here, in one decisive stroke, Zenia manages to explain why her aunt wasn't also apprehended in Berlin and also how she and Roz have experienced similar disorientation with identity:

'[My aunt] wasn't Jewish,' says Zenia. 'She was my father's sister. My father wasn't Jewish either, but after Nuremberg laws were passed he was treated as one, because he was married to one. Hell, even my mother wasn't Jewish! Not by religion. She was Catholic, as a matter of fact. But two of her four grandparents were Jewish, so she was classified as a *mischling*, first degree. A mixture. Did you know they had degrees?' (399)

Rather than probe further, in ways that may bring to light inconsistencies in Zenia's story, Roz can only focus on this new bond between them: "So Zenia is a mixture, like herself!" (399). Roz does lob a few questions at Zenia, but they seem less provoked by doubt than by a yearning for narrative detail. Zenia continues her tale, building to the pivotal moment of her aunt's first contact with Roz's father, who, by dint of his underworld contacts and resources, is able to secure transport for Zenia and her aunt out of Germany (399-400). Seemingly aware of the one detail Roz most longs to hear, Zenia concludes by adding that her aunt "talked about [Roz's] father a lot—what a hero he was," which gave Roz "back a little bit of faith" (400-401). Zenia says even more about Roz's father, though, telling her that "she used to pretend that [he] was [her own] father, and that some day he would come to get [her], and [she would] move into his house" (401). Zenia's story, moreover, not only enables Roz "to think well of [her father]," as she has long desired to, but also establishes a kind of sororal affinity between her and Roz (401).

Upon hearing this moving account of her father's heroism, Roz is "practically in tears" (401). Zenia's story has weakened Roz's defenses. But even as she is delighted by this new information, Roz remembers something Tony long ago told her: "Zenia lies" (401). The memory of Tony's admonition elicits a flicker of suspicion in Roz, and while Zenia's veneer of sincerity does give Roz pause, she proceeds to have Zenia explain the rather glaring discrepancies between the story of her past told to Tony and the one just told to her. Roz's questions hardly rattle Zenia, though; she is imperturbable. With a trickster's wit and cunning, she fends off every suspicion and resolves every contradiction. To build credibility, she even admits to Roz that "she made up a different

past for herself" with Tony and yet another with Charis (402). Zenia acknowledges that "[it] wasn't a good thing—it was terrible, I suppose, to tell those stories. I owe both of them an apology. But I didn't think I could've told them the real story, what really happened to me. They wouldn't have understood it" (402). Zenia's trick, we begin to see, is to make Roz feel that *only she* will understand, to turn her attention away from Zenia's fictions and instead towards Roz's singular ability to receive the truth. Whereas earlier Zenia leverages Tony's childhood trauma, seducing her with the promise of genuine female intimacy, here she leverages Roz's need to corroborate her father's heroism, flattering her belief that only she—not Tony, not Charis—can remain invulnerable to Zenia. Earlier, Roz admits to herself that she "must have thought she was some kind of lion-tamer, some kind of bullfighter; that she could succeed where her two friends had failed," indicating that pride as well may compel her to invite Zenia closer (392). Roz tries to convince herself that asking Zenia over to her home for drinks is "merely hospitable," and that she had not "felt the pride working in her at the time" (392). But after hearing this story about her father, coupled with Zenia's nimble testimony, Roz is effectively charmed: "[Zenia] gives Roz a long look, straight out of her deep indigo eyes, and Roz is touched. She, Roz—she alone—has been chosen, to understand. And she does, she does" (402). Roz is convinced of Zenia's sincerity; as with Tony, the ruse has succeeded. Roz is sure that "Zenia has not evaded [or] wiggled or squirmed," and that she has demonstrated "[some] admirable quality" (403). Zenia's trickery has disarmed Roz; she can commence with her robbery.

Whether true or not, Zenia has already told Roz that she is a journalist, and that she has been in Europe as of late researching sexual harassment in the workplace. One reason to be suspicious of this account, of course, is that Zenia just happens to appear as a waitress for a couple who owns a women's magazine. Given Zenia's past behavior, and given tricksters' ability to appear at opportune moments, it would be difficult to attribute this encounter with Roz to coincidence. It is also difficult to ignore the rhetorical calibration of Zenia's description of her recent work history. Her purported worldliness enthralls Roz; she thinks to herself that "Zenia has been out in the world. The wide world, wider than Toronto; the deep world, deeper than the small pond where Roz is such a large and sheltered frog. Zenia makes Roz feel not only protected, but lax. Her own battles have been so minor" (403). This recalls Zenia's earlier effect on Tony, whose childhood trauma is reduced to a footnote alongside Zenia's trickster tale of being forced into prostitution. Again, in measuring her narrative by her target's sensibilities, Zenia effectively primes Roz, opening a path to steal and consume her valuables, beginning with control of the magazine.

Since Roz now sees Zenia as a "beautiful and successful career woman" whose misfortunes have made her a "homeless wandering waif," she resolves to "shelter her," and she offers Zenia a position writing for the magazine (406-407). We remember, however, from their college years, that Tony wrote Zenia's history term paper for her, which perhaps isn't the sort of thing we would expect from someone with Zenia's dazzling journalism résumé. What is even more suspicious, though, is that upon receiving Roz's offer, Zenia claims to be "emptied out for now, story-wise" and has a

"better idea" (407). Zenia asks instead for a position with their advertising department, which Roz quickly agrees to. Rather quickly, Zenia infiltrates Roz's rarefied social circle, attending elite parties and gaining clout with the magazine. When the magazine's editor leaves her position, Zenia is somehow offered this high-level job. Emboldened by her promotion, she even has the brazenness to suggest, to the board of directors, changing the magazine's name from WiseWomanWorld to simply Woman, which Roz supports with some hesitation. Zenia brings other changes: "Gone are the mature achievers, the stories about struggling to overcome sexism and stacked odds [and] the heavy-hitting health care stories," replaced by "five-page spreads on spring fashions, and new diets and hair treatments and wrinkle creams, and quizzes about the man in your life and whether you're handling your relationship well" (409). It is notable that under Zenia's guidance, the magazine moves away from content oriented towards women's advancement and wellness and more in the direction of women's consumerism and courtship. The tensions between these two approaches, in my view, are plainly ideological. WiseWomanWorld, under Roz's ownership and guidance, has a distinctly feminist sensibility; Zenia's newfangled Woman publication, on the other hand, offers a more normative or even fetishistic engagement with femininity, with its focus on women's couture, weight loss, cosmetics, and marriageability. This newer iteration of the magazine proves to be a successful business model; Roz thinks to herself, "they're making money, finally" (410). Zenia may not have robbed Roz of her magazine, but her influence changes the magazine in ways Roz questions, even as it becomes more lucrative. Roz's first interest in the magazine, while not explicitly feminist, was an aspiration to "high ideals and hope" and

to provide a venue for women to share information and build community (388). Zenia's aspiration for the magazine to provide women better direction with "how to look" is simply a departure from "the original idea," or Roz's understanding of and vision for the magazine (409).

Zenia's tricksterism in this context, moreover, again opens a liminal space in the narrative. By using her wiles to seize control of the magazine, and by promoting this "shift in content," Zenia has brought to light tensions surrounding women's representation, and she has also taken a position that can really only be called antifeminist (409). Her reconceptualization of the magazine, that is, treats women primarily as "average" consumers; it is a capitalistic approach, responsive only to market research and "demographics" (409). Being market driven, though, does not necessarily make Zenia's strategy antifeminist. It is, rather, the pairing of this strategy with what Zenia's changes and statements imply about women. For instance, the new title of the magazine removes "Wise," and Zenia also tells Roz that the magazine's target audience is not "intellectuals" (409). A reader of Zenia's Woman publication—the new pared down title also being more essentialist than the original—will be left with the impression that women are primarily concerned with their looks, sex, and treating men as "accessories" (410). This magazine, whose title invokes an expansive, even universal womanhood, now, under Zenia's leadership, curates its content according to interests inimical to feminism.

Still, relegating Zenia to the position of antifeminist is not only complicated; it also contradicts some of my early remarks on her relation to feminism. As a magazine

editor, even with her seemingly antifeminist orientation, she can just as easily be regarded as an industrious businesswoman. Roz notes Zenia's ability to "work the room" (408), and that she is "sharp as a tack, smart as a whip" (407). So it is important to at least acknowledge that Zenia's fast rise at the magazine, whose board of directors is predominantly male, represents women's career advancement, an unequivocal feminist ideal. This, I want to suggest, brings into view a different iteration of the same feminist paradox discussed earlier. Specifically, one of the hallmarks of Zenia's tricksterism is her ability to signify contradictory ideas within the narrative. On the one hand, her ambition and success at the magazine are a testament to feminism's emergence in corporate culture; on the other, her new direction for the magazine, while profitable, somehow entails a smaller, less nuanced conception of womanhood. Ultimately, though, this paradox, where Zenia signifies both an affirmation and repudiation of feminism, becomes a productive function of the narrative, drawing closer attention to tensions within feminism.

Zenia's relationship with Roz, therefore, further demonstrates what I have called the novel's narrative stress test. The novel contains a number of paradoxes with respect to feminism, and the paradoxes become an occasion to refine how we understand women's relation to feminism. In my reading of Zenia's relationship with Roz, I have used the example of Zenia's tricksterism—her infiltration of the magazine and her swiftly imposed changes to its design and content—to show how one form of feminist paradox arises. Namely, Zenia's attainment of an executive role with the magazine may represent feminist progress, but the interests served by her actions in this role may represent

antifeminist backlash. The novel's female trickster, in raising the specter of paradox or incoherence within feminism, elicits ambivalence, which takes a number of forms. The form most shared by Tony, Roz and Charis is their simultaneous attraction to and loathing for Zenia. Potts ascribes this form of ambivalence to Zenia's embodiment of "contradictions inherent in a dichotomous world view, [emerging] from women's attempts to repress those aspects of their natures that are deemed incompatible with prevailing sexual stereotypes" (292). While I agree that the three main characters repress desires that Zenia recognizes and exploits, I think the contradictions Potts describes bear upon more than sexual stereotypes. That is, the ambivalence Zenia provokes can be read as a more generalized sentiment, arising in large measure from women's negotiation of a social landscape changed by feminism. The chapter ends with a focus on Charis, as I consider her character uniquely emblematic of feminism's durability and promise. Even as she survives a deeply traumatic childhood, and even as Zenia tricks and robs her in appalling ways, Charis emerges from these harrowing experiences with newfound wisdoms as mother and friend. These two roles position her in relation to women of her own generation (Tony and Roz) and of the next one (Augusta), creating what I would suggest is an enduring, restorative community of women. Charis' narrative, moreover, demonstrates the viability of a feminism built upon self-affirmation, women's health, female friendship and mother/daughter affection, even after Zenia's ambush.

## Charis

Charis attended the same college as Zenia, and knew of her, but does not meet her until 1970. She teaches yoga classes through a local co-op, and one day Zenia attends a

class, strangely wearing sunglasses. The sunglasses turn out to be important, as they are meant to conceal a black eye Zenia claims is from being punched by West. The black eye is Zenia's apertural ruse, meant to elicit Charis' concern and curiosity, and as with Tony and Roz, this ruse is designed to stir specific feelings associated with trauma. For Charis, this means feelings of victimhood, vulnerability and even suffering, stemming from an unstable and abusive childhood. Zenia's tricksterism with Charis, then, entails making herself appear helpless and imperiled; she somehow knows that this particular charade will most compel Charis' kindness. My aim in this section is threefold: to provide insight into Charis' eventual, heightened susceptibility to the appearance of suffering; to explain how Zenia exploits this susceptibility; and lastly to show how Charis' later close relationships with her daughter and her two closest friends are insinuations of feminism's durability and restorability. Charis' story, I want to suggest, is a thematic convergence point for Atwood's larger project with this novel: using a feminized, folkloric narrative device—the trickster—to lay bare and comment upon women's vulnerabilities but ultimately suggesting that these vulnerabilities, while tragic and unyielding, do not erode women's capacities for friendship and motherhood. In the novel's present, after Charis has endured numerous and unspeakable misfortunes, she observes that her house, which she finally owns after living in it for many years, is "fragile but steady" and "is still standing" (317). Like this small, "flimsy," remote island house, with its "cracked walls," Charis is timeworn but steadfast (317). In the reading that follows, I explain more clearly the origin of her vulnerability and her resolve.

As the narrative turns to Charis' childhood, we learn that her birth name is actually Karen. Her decision to later call herself by a different name evinces a deeper desire to dissociate from any possible reminders of her traumatic childhood. Charis thinks of her name as a "leather bag, a grey one," where she "collected everything she didn't want" (293). She imagines throwing this bag into Lake Ontario, which for her represents throwing "away as many of the old wounds and poisons as she could" (293). While Tony and Roz also change their names at different points of their lives, or have their names changed, Charis' name change feels more existential, intended to discard or drive away an entire younger self. She thinks to herself, "[that] was the end of Karen. Karen was gone. But the lake [where she threw the leather bag] was inside Charis really, so that's where Karen was too. Down deep" (294). These metaphors for interiority and depth evoke the severity of Charis' trauma, its inexorable presence within her. In next examining the etiology of her trauma, we can see how her tragic childhood compels her name change and also makes her vulnerable to Zenia.

Like Tony and Roz, Charis is separated from a parent when she is very young. She never met her father, who died in World War II, and lives with her mother, Gloria, for the first part of her childhood. But when Charis is seven, her mother becomes ill and takes her to her grandmother's home, a farm that Gloria herself "hated" as a child (257). It's not an altogether unwelcome change for Charis, as her mother is physically abusive and often neurotic. For instance, Gloria misunderstands and becomes enraged by Charis' sleepwalking: "Why do you do that? Why? said her mother, shaking her, and [she] could not answer. My God, you're an idiot! Don't you know what could happen to you out

there? But [she] didn't know, and her mother would say, I'll teach you! Little bitch!"

(259). This is reminiscent of Anthea's reaction to Tony's ambidexterity; in both, a mother treats something natural in her child as monstrous, and in need of forced correction. In spite of her mother's abusive behavior, Charis doesn't become resentful or shut off. She believes Gloria loves her but that her "nerves"—implicitly a nervous disorder brought on by Charis' father being killed in the war, "leaving [Gloria] to bring up Karen all by herself"—interfere with her maternal sensibility (258). In the past, Charis has also noticed Gloria's soured relationship with her own mother, and that "for a long time [they] had hardly been on speaking terms," which seems to make Charis more forgiving of Gloria's shortcomings as a mother (257). We learn, too, that Gloria ran away from home when "she was only sixteen," desperate to escape "from under the thumb of her own mother" (257).

These details about Charis' family are significant, I would suggest, because they begin to comprise a pattern of intergenerational dysfunction between mothers and daughters. As the grandchild, Charis bears some of the burden from these unresolved tensions between her mother and grandmother. Once they arrive at her grandmother's farm, for example, Charis finds herself told to do one thing by her mother, another by her grandmother; she is the rope in this tug of war:

The grandmother passed a cup to Karen, and Karen's mother said, "Oh, Mother, she doesn't drink tea," and the grandmother said, "She does now." Karen thought there might be an argument, but her grandmother added, "If you're leaving her with me, you're leaving her with me. 'Course, you can always take her with you." Karen's mother clamped her mouth shut. (265-266)

After Gloria yields to her mother's force, she retreats to her bedroom, and Charis tries to comfort her mother, who was "looking more desolate than [she] had ever seen her" (266). In this moment, her grandmother and mother seem to project onto Charis hints of their own grief and loss, from time apart and unspoken resentments. Gloria then, through sobbing, tells her seven-year-old daughter that her own mother "was never like a real mother," and Charis can only "[wonder] what she meant" (266). Gloria's mother shares this sense of a strained or incongruous parent/child relationship; she tells Charis, with some despair, that she "wasn't the right mother for [Gloria]" nor "she the right daughter, for [her]. And now look. But it can't be helped" (269). This difficult span of days, when Charis begins living in a new place and sees up close this estrangement between her mother and grandmother, begins the most formative period of her life, where she finds stability in her grandmother's "hard[ness]" but also experiences considerable loss and horrifying abuse (277).

Over the next several months, Charis gets to know her grandmother much more than she had previously. Some of what she learns is unpleasant, like her grandfather being "crushed by a tractor" and her grandmother's pet pig being served as breakfast one morning (271, 278). But she also finds comfort in the pastoral quaintness of the farm: "There was a deep sweet smell, a glimmering of flowers, milkweeds as [Charis] learned later, and a fluttering of many moths, the white flakes of their wings kissing against her" (269). Importantly, Charis also feels "welcomed" in her grandmother's home, a feeling that has eluded her elsewhere (270). There is a genuine, if reticent, closeness between her and her grandmother that emerges. For instance, we learn that it was her

grandmother who taught Charis her odd Sunday ritual of using a pin to randomly select a Bible passage to read. Even more consequentially, her grandmother introduces Charis to her belief that in death "[only] the body dies," which will become a cornerstone of Charis' eschatology as an adult (277). The two of them also work on the farm together, an experience which inspires Charis' later interest in horticulture and husbandry, and they visit the local cemetery, where Charis sees her grandfather's grave for the first time.

After some time, Charis thinks to herself that "[her] grandmother is a safe place for her, although hard. Or because hard. Not shifting, not watery. She doesn't change" (277). Her grandmother has a hardened austerity, but Charis is drawn to her unflinching candor and her regimented lifestyle. Given the instability and precarity she experiences with her parents, these months with her grandmother are restorative for Charis. Her grandmother may not be maternal, in the fullest sense of that word, but she offers a constant attention and affection Charis has only felt intermittently in childhood.

Months later, Charis does see her mother again but not in the way she expects. Charis is supposed to meet her mother at the train station and return back to the city with her, but instead, we learn that her mother's illness has worsened and that she has attempted suicide multiple times. Aunt Vi, Gloria's sister, has also had her admitted to a psychiatric hospital for more intensive care. Given her mother's weakened condition, Charis struggles to even recognize her; she thinks to herself that "she [had] never before seen her mother's face" and that it appeared "expressionless as a plate" (282). Rather than continue living with her grandmother, as she would prefer, Charis is left with her Aunt Vi and Uncle Vern, neither of whom she knows well or feels close to. More time

passes, and Charis' aunt and uncle take her to visit her mother in the hospital periodically, but Gloria never fully recovers. The initial shock of losing her mother is made worse by Charis' realization that she would continue living with Vi and Vern.

At first, her aunt and uncle's home is simply less desirable than her grandmother's. Charis wistfully thinks about being "back at [the] farm, gathering eggs [and] picking yellow beans in the sun" with her grandmother (284). But she settles into her new living environment, as her aunt and uncle offer comfort. Vi and Vern bake Charis a cake for her eighth birthday; they buy her a new bicycle; and they make some improvements to a rec room in their cellar (284-286). By this point, Charis has already noticed her uncle's habit of touching her, which she "doesn't like" (285). Even as a child, Charis recognizes the inappropriateness of her uncle's behavior, and there are hints of her fear in his presence. The awfulness of what ensues for Charis, being subjected to her uncle's ongoing sexual abuse, brings about a pivotal moment in her psychological development: she begins to dissociate from her body and her name. A new duality or schism emerges; there is a kind of doubling or splitting of her ego, which she experiences as a sequence of surreal images:

[Karen's] skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather, light as air [...] She flies over to the window and in behind the curtain, and stays there, looking out through the cloth [...] What she sees is a small pale girl, her face contorted and streaming, nose and eyes wet as if she's drowning—gasping for air [...] On top of her is a dark mass, worrying at her, like an animal eating another animal [...] Charis doesn't know she is Charis, of course. She has no name yet. (290)

The cocoon, of course, may signify rebirth, and the lightness of her new volant body suggests empowerment and agility. Even as Charis undergoes this renewal or

metamorphosis, though, the images of suffocation and consumption convey a liminality, a feeling that this possibility of transcendence is tempered by the weight of her physical trauma. And lastly, even as she describes this change in herself, Charis also seems to experience what Jacques Lacan termed *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition of the self. In Lacan's Seminars, specifically Book 1 of Freud's Papers on Technique, in part focused on the question of how a subject comes to attain self-knowledge, he explains that "méconnaissance is not ignorance [and that it] represents a certain organization of affirmations and negations, to which the subject is attached. Hence it cannot be conceived without correlate knowledge... There must surely be, behind his misrecognition, a kind of knowledge of what there is to misrecognize" (167). We could say that Charis' inability to affirm her identity at this moment—her feeling of namelessness—is a form of *méconnaissance.* She does not yet recognize herself as Charis but still experiences attachment to a new, emergent self-knowledge. In time, as she develops a keener sense of how her trauma has changed her and also resolves to inhabit this alternate or posttraumatic self, "Charis" begins to emerge more fully while "Karen" remains present but submerged.

Charis continues to live with her aunt and uncle for many years; she effectively grows up with them. When she is old enough to enroll in college, she moves into a campus residence hall, which will be where she encounters Tony and Roz for the first time. But college fails to engage or inspire her, and Charis is soon eager to light out for the territory, or as she puts it, "to go away somewhere else [and] to drop out of sight" (293). By this point, she is twenty-one and beginning to assert herself and embrace her

adult freedoms. She travels, hitchhikes, works in different jobs, joins an ashram on the West Coast for a while, and even lives on a communal farm. These experiences both prefigure her later embrace of ecofeminism and also reflect some of her grandmother's influence. She eventually returns to Toronto and finds work teaching yoga classes, where she will first encounter Zenia. In turning to examine Charis and Zenia's relationship more closely, I would underscore that Charis' tragic backstory, as has hopefully become clearer in the foregoing discussion, should be read as a precursor to her later sensitivities. Zenia presents herself to Charis as an imperiled, defenseless victim, which evokes a particular anxiety and empathy in Charis. When she sees Zenia's badly bruised eye, "[Charis] winces: she can feel the blow on her own flesh, her own eye" (242). Just as Zenia exploits Tony's need for female intimacy and Roz's need to see her father as heroic, she targets Charis' own melancholic attachment to "Karen," figured as the spectral presence of her younger self. In order to effectively trick Charis, Zenia will find ways to evoke "Karen" and to arrogate whatever sympathies Charis feels for her own trauma.

When Zenia appears in the yoga class, Charis is quick to notice her seeming frailty and wanness. Zenia is "thin as a razor, so thin Charis can see her ribcage right through [her] leotard, each rib in high relief as if carved," and her "skin is white as mushrooms" (241-242). Charis thinks to herself that she "knows unhealth when she sees it" and that Zenia appears "cowed somehow, beaten, defeated" (242-243). Perhaps more significantly, though, in their first conversation, Zenia tells Charis that she has cancer, which has already required a hysterectomy. Zenia also claims to be a domestic abuse

victim, explaining that West "can't stand to be around sickness" and that he "gets furious with [her]" and "hates [her] to cry" (245). This narrative—where Zenia is a doubly tragic figure, suffering from cancer and subjected to her domestic partner's cruelty—immediately elicits a nervous, compassionate response in Charis. She becomes "anxious," begins "fretting" and feels "inadequate," and when Zenia one night appears at her doorstep with a "fresh cut on her lip," claiming West threw her out, Charis "[m]utely holds out her arms" and invites her in (246). Her "desire" to offer solace to Zenia is "so strong [...] it's like a fist on her neck," despite a curious inability to reconcile this news of West's violence with her memory of him being "gentle as a giraffe" (245). Charis even admits struggling to "picture him hitting anyone, much less Zenia" (245). Still, any suspicion from this discrepancy is fleeting, insufficient to temper her hospitality. Zenia has made herself appear helpless, as a victim of male aggression, which provokes a response from Charis implicitly associated with her trauma. When Zenia first claims that West abuses her, for instance, Charis seems reminded of her uncle:

[P]eople can have deceptive exteriors. Men especially. They can put on a good act, they can make you believe they are model citizens and that they are right and you are wrong. They can fool everyone and make you seem like a liar [...] Indignation rises in her, the beginning of anger. But anger is unhealthy for her so she pushes it away. (245)

Charis' response here evinces an enduring susceptibility to—and a willed deflection of—thoughts associated with ill-intentioned men. It also further demonstrates Zenia's strange, unexplained ability to elicit a desired response from someone. Just as with Tony and Roz, Zenia here appeals to Charis in a very measured, personal way, as though she already knows things about her past. This, again, is the main rhetorical power of Zenia's

ruse: her story targets a sensibility borne of Charis' childhood abuse and vulnerability.

Zenia's story is so affecting, in fact, that over time she becomes for Charis a kind of psychic proxy for "Karen."

Zenia's appearance of suffering, that is, not only reminds Charis of her own trauma but actually effects what could be called an ego-boundary loss, a psychoanalytic term for a phenomenon where a person loses a sense of where their own body, mind, or influence ends and these characteristics in another begin. <sup>10</sup> Or more reductively, the self/other distinction becomes somehow confounded or weakened. The dissolution of Charis' ego boundary takes the form of a gradual blurring of the distinction between Zenia and Karen. After Zenia has stayed with Charis for some time, and has kindled her posttraumatic responsivity, Karen begins to reemerge from "the lake inside Charis" where she has kept this repressed part of herself submerged (294). But as Karen "come[s] to the surface," Charis now sees her differently: "She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia" (295). Charis also experiences Karen's "return" as a reinhabiting of her body: "[Karen] walks towards Charis and bends, and blends into her, and now she's inside Charis's body" (295). Significantly, after Karen "com[es] back" and now resembles Zenia, Charis and her boyfriend, Billy, sleep together, but this particular sexual experience is different from what Charis is used to (295). Earlier in her relationship with Billy, Charis thinks of feeling "like a trampoline" during sex and seems to dissociate from her own body, which is understandable given her past abuse:

Maybe if there had been less [...] plain old sex [...] she would have learned to enjoy it more, in time. If she could relax. As it was she merely detached herself, floated her spirit off to one side, filled herself with another

essence—apple, plum—until he'd finished and it was safe to re-enter her body. (230)

On this night, though, Charis thinks to herself that "she can feel everything [...] the body moving, responding; she can feel the pleasure shoot through her like electricity," even as Karen's reemergence hampers her bodily autonomy (295). Incidentally, this is also when Charis becomes pregnant with Billy's child; Charis thinks "[d]eep inside, far inside her body, something new is moving" (296). On the one hand, the pregnancy seems to further complicate Charis' ego boundary loss, as this unhomeliness in her own body makes her question whether she is the baby's mother: "She has always known who the father was, of course [...] But the mother? Was it herself and Karen, sharing their body? Or was it Zenia, too?" (296). On the other, after sleeping with Billy this time, Charis "forgets about Karen, she forgets about herself" and feels that "[e]verything in her has been fused together" (295). She alternates between feeling decentered and then centered, or between feeling her autonomy weakened and then restored. Charis also, for the first time, seems to fantasize about "being Zenia" during sex with Billy, which I would suggest marks Zenia's fullest infiltration of Charis' psychic and physical space (296).

Moreover, Zenia's tricksterism with Charis is directed at a specific responsiveness, rooted in her complicated psychology. As an unloved orphan and a sexual abuse survivor, Charis has many points of vulnerability, giving Zenia a number of ways to provoke and trick her. It is not a coincidence, for instance, that Zenia repeatedly calls Charis "Karen" after being told she no longer uses this name (250, 253). It undermines Charis' desire to shed herself of this name and identity, seen most clearly when Charis thinks to herself that she "is not Karen" and that "[s]he has not been Karen

for a long time, [...] never wants to be Karen again, [...] pushes [Karen] down towards the water" (256). By calling her Karen, Zenia takes away Charis' power to self-identify, keeps her pained associations with this name closer to the surface, and contributes to her ego-boundary loss. Zenia also, as detailed above, exploits Charis' enlarged sensitivity to suffering, which is how she so quickly becomes her houseguest and moves into position to rob her. By the time Zenia absconds with Billy one morning, she has not only slaughtered Charis' chickens but has also scoffed at the news of her pregnancy. She rudely tells Charis, "[t]his house is going to be one whole hell of a lot smaller with a screaming brat in it" and that she "could've waited till I was dead" (306). Along with this bizarre rebuke, Zenia again targets Charis' vulnerability: she pretends to know that Billy will be unwelcoming towards the pregnancy and even suggests that Charis get an abortion (306). At this point, the sheer physicality of the pregnancy induces a new vulnerability for Charis, as her "body feels different" and "has a different energy," but what makes the pregnancy especially fraught is its imbrication with Charis' unstable identity and her history of physical trauma (297). More specifically, Charis conceives her daughter on the same night she "can't keep [Karen] away any more," which is also the first time she notes a similarity between Karen's appearance and Zenia's (295). Some weeks later, Charis begins to think "that she has part of Zenia inside herself" (298). Her body, then, not only bears the legacy of her trauma, and carries new life, but is also somehow inhabited by this alterity, a spectral otherness that seems to arise from this mingling of fear and desire occasioned by Karen and Zenia.

Still, in spite of this complicated phenomenology of Charis' subjectivity, the pregnancy centers her. Her relationship with her own body also changes, as her trauma recedes again into that deep "lake" and her baby engenders a new vitality and lightness:

[Charis'] stomach was growing harder and rounder now, her breasts were swelling. She knew that most of her white-light energy was being directed into the baby now, not into Zenia or even Billy. The baby was responding, she could sense it; inside her it was listening, it was attentive, it was absorbing the light like a flower. (294, 304)

Even more notably, Charis begins to regard her motherhood as an opportunity to interrupt her family's pattern of intergenerational trauma and filial discord: "The baby inside her was Karen again, unborn, and with Charis watching over her she would have a better chance. She would be born to the right mother, this time" (304). Given how Charis' troubled past continues to wear on her, in the various ways explained above, it is actually surprising here to find this character so invigorated and hopeful. But looked at more structurally, as a narrative device, this development may be less surprising, as Charis' pregnancy and ensuing motherhood can be read as the culmination of what I have been calling the novel's stress test. That is, if we consider the circumstances of Charis' pregnancy and the ways it comes to symbolize renewal and resilience and community, this part of the novel begins to further suggest feminism's enduring place in women's lives.

First, it is significant that Charis does not immediately share the news of her pregnancy with Zenia. Zenia, we recall, has by this point told Charis that she has a gynecologic cancer, which required a hysterectomy. With this in mind, Charis decides that her news could upset Zenia since she "can't have babies" (297). Charis' kindness in

this context is already ironic given Zenia's past trickery and characteristic conduct; that is, she does not deserve this gentle treatment from Charis. But what makes Charis' choice even more ironic is Zenia's eventual reaction to the pregnancy, which Charis describes as "contemptuous" (305). Zenia tells Charis that she "screwed up" and offers no "congratulations or woman-to-woman hugs" (305). And as noted above, Zenia questions Billy's desire to have children and even raises the possibility of aborting the pregnancy. I read these behaviors—where Zenia creates tensions and troubles in the narrative—as further instances of her tricksterism. Earlier in the chapter, I noted Atwood's own comments on the trickster figure, from her review of Hyde's book, where she writes that tricksters "disrupt conventions" and "concoct stories to stir things up" (xiv). In her mistreatment of Charis here, offering cynicism instead of encouragement, Zenia is indeed breaking with convention and provoking distress. She is also subverting a particular type of feminist identification, insofar as Charis draws new strength and creativity from her pregnancy. In Andrea O'Reilly's essay on matricentric feminism, introduced earlier in this chapter, she explains how the experience of mothering could be a "site of empowerment and a location of social change" for women (22). The reason I consider this innovation in feminism especially relevant, with respect to Atwood's novel, is because it treats the mother/daughter dynamic as central to women's advancement. In this story about three women whose mothers, for varying reasons, are unable to form meaningful, enduring connections with their daughters, the novel builds to a moment, near its conclusion, where we realize that Charis has ultimately succeeded where these other mothers could not. Augusta, home from college for the weekend, has just gotten

upset at Charis for calling her by her birthname—August—and Charis responds with characteristic thoughtfulness:

"I'll make you some muffins," [Charis] says, attempting to conciliate.

Charis feels her eyes watering. Augusta hasn't said anything this affectionate for some time. And she does find it difficult to believe—that a person would love her even when she isn't trying. (497)

At this moment, arguably the novel's most touching exchange, it is clear that Charis' mothering has nurtured in Augusta a dignity and assertiveness that she herself has struggled to develop freely, without hindrance. The emergence of this warm relationship between Charis and her adult daughter, after such serious adversity, ultimately suggests a new viability for feminism, in line with O'Reilly's comments here: "[feminism] must foreground the centrality of women's reproductive identities and lives and the importance of care in our larger culture" (25). For Charis, her role as Augusta's mother is indeed an identity, one unclouded by fear or shame. After this exchange with Augusta, she even "feels absolved" (498), as though her daughter's recognition and forgiveness confer an almost spiritual exhilaration.

Long before this tender moment, though, there is another, equally powerful affirmation of feminism. In the immediate aftermath of Zenia's ambush, Charis is alone and pregnant. She is also reeling from what has just happened: Billy drunkenly attacking her the night prior, waking to find him and Zenia gone, and then finding her chickens slaughtered. This confluence of horrors seems to awaken Karen, as Charis feels a surge of old shame and despair; she even thinks of suicide: "That is Karen speaking. Karen is

<sup>&</sup>quot;Tomorrow. The ones with the sunflower seeds. You always liked those."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You don't have to keep giving me stuff, Mom," says Augusta, in an oddly grown-up voice. "I love you anyway."

back, Karen has control of their body [...] Karen is desolate, Karen is sick with disgust, Karen wants them to die" (310). But as she hits this low point, she finds a new resilience and strength through her connection to her baby, and through reclaiming her body: "[If] she does that, [her] baby will die too, and Charis refuses to let that happen. She calls all of her strength, all of her inner healing light, her grandmother's blue light, into her hands; [...] she pushes Karen away from her as hard as she can, back down into the shadows" (310). Charis' will to endure, as a self-determined mother, overpowers the grip of her past. Still, she remains eager to find Billy and Zenia, and she calls West, whose number Zenia left behind; this unexpectedly reconnects her with Tony. Charis hasn't spoken to her since college, but her mention of Zenia's name elicits Tony's concern, as though she intuits a familiar threat. Impressively, Tony travels by ferry to Charis' home the next day, and before long, she reaches out to Roz for help with legal questions. Within a matter of days, Tony and Roz hear of Charis' entire predicament: her childhood abuse, her stolen inheritance, her pregnancy, and her unfortunate involvement with Zenia. The two women effectively rescue Charis, doing whatever they can to help get her affairs in order; they also give her unsolicited care and support as she nears the end of her pregnancy. Tony and Roz's swift responsiveness in this moment, towards someone they hardly know, suggests a particular sensibility. They recognize that Charis has been tricked and robbed by Zenia, and they understand the urgency of her pregnancy. This, moreover, is the beginning of the three women's adult friendship. Their enduring closeness, at the novel's conclusion, represents community, solidarity and nurturance among women; it affirms feminism's enduring resolve and relevance.

The Robber Bride suggests, finally, that feminism is a source of both uplift and ambivalence. While Atwood's three central characters each represent a positive outcome of second-wave feminism, the novel's female trickster has a very different narrative function. Zenia's mischief and machinations are essentially cynical; she mocks each of the three women's trust, takes from them what she desires, and then vanishes. Still, Zenia remains alluring, especially to those whose generosity she exploits, like Roz and Charis. She is an object of both desire and repulsion, an ambivalence that parallels some women's relationship with feminism. The novel's tricksterism foregrounds this ambivalence, using this narrative tradition to create a space to examine feminism more critically and to question its enduring relevance. But ultimately, the novel's representations of motherhood and female friendship become powerful affirmations of feminism. Atwood's trickster tale—a narrative stress test—demonstrates feminism's resilience and capacity for renewal.

#### Notes

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> There are some loose parallels between Roz's character and iconic American publisher and Pulitzer Prize winner Katharine Graham (1917-2001), who was president of *The Washington Post* from 1963 to 1991. Like Roz, Graham came to this position through her family's ownership of a publishing corporation; also, Graham was the first female chief executive of a Fortune 500 company. Lastly, like Roz, Graham found ways to promote feminist interests through the media outlets she either controlled or invested in (Steinem 2001).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Portions of Betty Friedan's feminist classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) were originally published in the now defunct *Mademoiselle* (1935-2001), a popular fashion and literary magazine mainly targeted at women. *Mademoiselle* also published original fiction by Flannery O'Connor, Sylvia Plath, Barbara Kingsolver, and Alice Munro.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> French author Françoise d'Eaubonne is generally credited with coining the term "ecofeminism" in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, though interest in this subfield's possibilities crossed the pond quickly. American feminists Susan Griffin (*Women and Nature*, 1978), Mary Daly (*Gyn/Ecology*, 1978) and Carolyn Merchant (*The Death of Nature*, 1980) all published ecofeminist monographs in the years closely following d'Eaubonne's seminal text.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Clowns and jesters, to be precise, often have a narrative or cultural function that runs deeper than mere amusement. As Kimberly A. Christen explains in *Tricksters & Clowns: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture* (1998), a comprehensive study of trickster variations, clowns and jesters "reveal something about

the cultures from which they arose and in which they continue to be perpetuated" (ix). She adds that "these multifaced characters have been and continue to be sources of entertainment, agents of social change, and mirrors of religious conviction for their audiences" (ix). Feste, the very witty clown of *Twelfth Night*, is a convenient example of this trickster from canonical English literature. He is given lines that contain notable thematic resonance within the play, so much so that his punning and other word play have drawn extensive criticism. For recent examples, see "Feste, *Twelfth Night*'s Material Fool" (Blakeley, 2015) and "This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen': Feste, Lear's Fool and the border between 'idiocy' and mental illness" (Equestri, 2019); for a book-length study of the character, see *Feste: The Dramatic Function of the Wise Fool in* Twelfth Night (Houston, 1962).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Reesman, Jeanne Campbell. "Introduction." *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myths in American Fiction*. ix-xxxi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For further reading, see Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 121-132.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For an excellent account of postfeminism's ascendance in the 1980s as a reaction against second-wave feminism, see Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Bhabha's essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," is where he gives his fullest, most direct account of ambivalence. It first appears in the journal *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), pp. 125-133; it also appears in *The Location of Culture*, pp. 121-133.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For more on antifeminism as a coherent movement or ideology, see Jerome Himmelstein's "The social basis of antifeminism" in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (March 1986), Ronnee Schreiber's *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics* (2008) and Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (2010).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> "Ego-boundary loss." The APA Dictionary of Psychology, dictionary.apa.org/ego-boundary-loss. Accessed 29 March 2021.

# **Chapter Four:**

## **Feminist Interventions in Romantic Comedy**

This final chapter is focused on the modern cinematic romantic comedy, or "romcom." As a genre whose popularity in Anglophone cultures has endured for nearly a century, it has a particular relevance for my dissertation given its discrete narrative conventionality, its frequent invocation of gendered teleologies, and its investment in women's narrative representation. I begin by considering the question of this genre's origins, with a view toward offering an historically oriented context for the later sections, which contain close readings of the romantic comedies *Enchanted* (2007) and *Eternal* Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004). The first section, then, is meant to establish a context for my later focus in the chapter, which is to approach the romcom as a site of narrative conflict. We can read in these narratives, I argue, a distinct ideological tussle, between warring conceptions of femininity and romance. We can even observe, as this genre has shifted and evolved over time, corresponding changes in mainstream culture's relationship with feminism. The existing scholarship on romantic comedy has at times brushed up against this correspondence—discernible parallels between romcom's narrative sensibility and feminism's social influence at a given period in history—but has yet to make it a focal point of study, as I aspire to here.

Celestino Deleyto (2012), for instance, in an essay on the utopian element in the genre, has examined how romantic comedy reflects "historically specific social protocols" (193). This could certainly be said of many cinematic or literary genres, but Deleyto adds that "romantic comedy is less a narrative of the heterosexual couple with a

happy ending than a particular type of story [allowing for] the critique of cultural conventions and protocols" (175). Deleyto's point is useful, as it refines the particularity of the romcom as a narrative form whose iterations may offer distinctive commentary, however explicitly or subtly, on these conventions and protocols. Claire Mortimer, as well, in examining changes in the genre during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s, has noticed this reactive or critical function of romantic comedy, claiming that "the impact of the 1960s on gender politics is written large in the characterization of the heroines of romantic comedies of the 1970s" (28). Mortimer also cites a temporary reduction in the number of romcoms produced towards the end of this decade, which she attributes to "Hollywood seeming nonplussed as to how to tackle the themes of love and relationships in the wake of feminism" (28). The genre, of course, came roaring back in the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of a sharply conservative cultural turn, in both Britain and the United States. Given that some of the genre's typical conventions heteronormative coupling, chivalry, courtship—are cut from the same ideological cloth as cultural conservativism, perhaps this is less attributable to coincidence than to a particular zeitgeist: the reemergence of romantic comedy in the 1980s, that is, can be regarded as a hegemonic phenomenon, reflective of a deeper sociocultural turn rightward in these years.

Accordingly, studies of romantic comedy tend to comment on this type of turn, where the genre's conventionality or tone is perceived to shift in relation to social change. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, for instance, suggests that romcoms "both reflect and contest the anxieties, assumptions and desires of the specific time and specific agencies

making the film" (13). One example of this, already noted above, is the marked change in tone that occurs among 1980s romcoms. In contrast with the "nervous" romantic comedies of the 1970s, where romance is often treated cynically or derisively, romcoms of the 1980s tend to embrace romance as a catalyst to secure heteronormativity and the nuclear family.<sup>2</sup> Mortimer offers this account of these films, their cultural relevance, and their juxtaposition with social change in the period:

[1980s romcoms] steadfastly reject the downbeat endings of the nervous romance in favour of fantastical happy endings, when seemingly impossible obstacles have been overcome so that the couple can be together. The continued popularity of the genre seems to suggest an enduring concern regarding gender roles and family structures; the films seem to embrace a mythical bygone age where true love can overcome everything, and offer a solution to our personal crises. This is against a backdrop of soaring divorce rates, ever growing numbers of single parent families and breakdown in traditional family structures. (18)

What I want to underscore about Mortimer's analysis here is how it reads tonal and thematic shifts in the genre in relation to a sociohistorical context. Just as many romcoms of the 1980s reflect a re-ascendent traditionalism, marked by a renewed attachment to idealized romance—the very narrative mode, we should note, treated more dismissively a decade earlier—more recent films in this genre bear similar markers of contemporaneous attitudes towards romance, normative gender, and the family.

We needn't look too far from our present moment for specific examples of this relation between the social mores of a given period and a coetaneous romcom conventionality. Clea DuVall's *Happiest Season* (2020), for example, garnered attention for being a rare major studio romantic comedy oriented around a lesbian couple and closeted sexuality.<sup>3</sup> By today's standards, it is not exactly edgy or transgressive to have a film narrative situated around these forms of sexual desire and identity. Still, as a

romcom, this film provoked a curiously harsh response from some critics. Shikar Verma asserts that DuVall's film "doesn't hold a candle [to] better movies of the genre." Ian Thomas Malone calls the film a "sloppy, regressive mess." And Brian Viner, in a derisive comparison to more traditional romcom fare, calls *Happiest Season* a "second-rate *Meet the Parents*." These strident criticisms, it should be noted, arrived amid a larger, more formidable round of praise for the film. That is, even as some critics found this romcom "crude" (Wilson), "phony" (Hewett), or "insulting" (Hertz), the prevailing critical assessment of this film has been positive. Philippa Snow's review in *New Statesman*, for instance, includes the following pithy account of the film's engagement with queer romance and of its relation to the romcom genre more generally:

[Happiest Season] cleverly turns a few of the enduring clichés of the genre on their heads – like many of the men in sappy movies, Abby plans to ask permission from her girlfriend's father to propose – and adds new jeopardy by spinning queerer touches: she is not just fighting to convince Harper's uptight parents that she is deserving of their daughter's hand in marriage, but to make them understand that Harper [...] should be married to a woman, period.

Snow's comments are representative of the film's generally favorable reception. I would suggest, though, that the disposition evinced by these less favorable—even caustic—appraisals reflects something more than differing cinematic taste; it may reflect a policing of the genre's conventional narrative features.

As a film that eschews the heteronormativity typical of the genre, *Happiest*Season elicits a kind of narrative anxiety: an uneasiness over modifications to a genre steeped in rigidly ideological conceptions of gender and sexuality. Still, the criticisms leveled at this film are directed as much at its divergence from romcom narrative conventionality as at its queer themes and characters, suggesting that the genre itself is

simply a contested discursive space, perhaps even a site of deeper ideological conflict. Alexandra Macaaron, for example, quips that "[for] a movie billed as an alternative 'romantic comedy,' *Happiest Season* falls short in both departments: romance and comedy." Without giving sufficient elaboration as to *how* the film falls short in these ways, this critic strangely objects to even calling *Happiest Season* a romcom. In a more favorable review, but one still critical of the film's genericity, Leah Johnson oddly faults the film for hewing *too closely* to romcom conventionality:

As a queer woman, I've spent much of my life engaging with traditionally straight-centric romantic comedies, and have longed for a movie that lived up to the promises *Happiest Season* made: queer women centered in a story that offered them the warm, fuzzy, holiday-cheery conclusion we deserve. But I miscalculated, because that's precisely where *Happiest Season* struggles—in its attempt to pour itself into the container of the classic, heterosexual romantic comedy, beat for traumatic beat. <sup>4</sup>

These disparate criticisms of *Happiest Season* begin to demonstrate a double bind imposed on the genre: some fault the film for straying too far from romcom conventionality, others for following it too closely. I read this imposition as a form of cultural arbitration or gatekeeping, reflective perhaps of an enduring, pervasive investment in—or aversion to—romantic ideology.<sup>5</sup> This ideology seems to undergird traditional romcom narrative conventionality, which aestheticizes and naturalizes heteronormative coupling, normative gender, courtly love, chivalry, and the nuclear family, to name a few common features, and has clearly retained a purchase on our culture. So even while romantic comedy, as this chapter will show, is an increasingly vexed, contested narrative terrain, the timelessness of its earliest conventionality remains

apparent in many recent popular romcoms, such as *The Lovebirds* (2020), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Nobody's Fool* (2018), and *Trainwreck* (2015).

This chapter is mainly concerned, however, with how the romantic comedy genre has been impacted by or responsive to feminism, as the latter has more fully emerged into the cultural mainstream. Giving fullest attention to *Enchanted* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, I consider specifically (1) how these films—their sensibilities, aesthetics, and narrative forms—are in dialogue with feminism, (2) how traditional romantic comedy tends to eroticize and perpetuate a narrow conception of femininity, and (3) how feminism has been absorbed into the genre in recent years but at times in ways that foreclose or elide critique. This last consideration bears most directly upon the dissertation's core argument, as my readings of *Enchanted* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* are meant to show, on one hand, how these films reflect feminism's impact on this narrative genre and, on the other, the variability of that impact.

In discussing these particular films, I suggest a distinction between two modes of romantic comedy: the assimilatory feminist narrative and the critical feminist narrative.<sup>6</sup> As my example of the first of these modes, *Enchanted* demonstrates how feminism, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has been assimilated into larger contemporary culture, as a sensibility no longer on the margins of political discourse but as one nearer the middle of mainstream Western (or liberal democratic) cultures. That is, in surveying romantic comedies over the past two decades, we find that many of these films reflect an increasingly feminist orientation towards narrative. The emergence of this new orientation in recent years, not only within romcoms but within Hollywood productions

more generally, is something others have noticed. Philip Green, for instance, in his book Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender and Hollywood (1998), argues that the "contemporary production of visual culture takes place under conditions prominently structured by the feminist cultural revolution of the 1970s" (2). Examples of this phenomenon are especially abundant in the romantic comedy genre: in contrast from the casual sexism of popular romcom films from earlier decades like *Starting Over* (1979) and Broadcast News (1987)—where narratives about women often culminate in a choice between professional or personal success, even as men are shown to attain both—more recent films like Legally Blonde (2001), The Devil Wears Prada (2006), and The *Proposal* (2009) represent more fully self-actualized women. In each of these films, the narrative culminates with a female protagonist securing greater prospects with both her career and her romantic relationship; one does not come at the expense of the other. Also, and more importantly, this more favorable, more equitable narrative outcome for women isn't treated as edgy or provocative or daring. Instead, these positive representations of women are now conventional; they are common. Elle Woods, the protagonist of Legally Blonde, graduates first in her class at Harvard Law School; Andy Sachs, of *The Devil Wears Prada*, is offered a prestigious position with a New York City publishing company; and Margaret Tate, of *The Proposal*, keeps her high-level position as an executive editor after having it jeopardized by a violation of her worker visa terms. These are auspicious circumstances, associated with elevated social power or mobility for these female characters. But by most accounts, these would not be referred to as "feminist films"; rather, they demonstrate feminism's absorption into a larger, more

complex narrative sensibility brought to bear on contemporary romantic comedy films. In calling the feminist element in this subcategory assimilatory, then, I am suggesting that the feminism in these films is now more a function of genre than of critique; the romcom genre itself is, as Deleyto explains in his study of the genre, an occasion for "the artistic articulation of current discourses on love, sex and marriage" and is now a narrative space for the representation of "the complicated adjustments of men and women to the new 'post-feminist' sexual politics" (149).

The second mode of romantic comedy examined in this chapter, which I am calling the critical feminist narrative, is less conventional. In contrast to the assimilatory feminist narrative, this second type of romcom is distinguished by experimentation, subversion or dark humor—common elements, it's worth noting, of postmodern literature. Also, and importantly, these narrative features are often imbued with a critical function. In recent romantic comedies like They Came Together (2014) and Isn't It Romantic (2019), there is an aspiration to comment on or question the genre in some way. These films invite closer attention to the various fanciful, unspoken assumptions that underlie romantic comedy: romantic relationships are the basis of a good life; romance acts as an antidote for cultural or class conflict; romance is teleological, or an end in and of itself; romance guarantees a "happily ever after" life trajectory; and the romcom genre itself is a source of reliable, timeless wisdom. They Came Together and Isn't It Romantic satirize these ideas, mocking the idealism typical of the genre. But ultimately, these films are more interested in lampooning romantic comedy than in critically examining its narrative conventionality and traditions, which is the function I

am attributing to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (hereafter *Eternal Sunshine*).

Using this film as my primary example of a critical feminist romcom, I will explain both how *Eternal Sunshine* deconstructs romcom conventionality and how this subversive approach to the genre can be read as a feminist narrative intervention.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that recent feminist interventions in romantic comedy have taken two primary forms: assimilatory and critical. The assimilatory feminist romcom, as I will show in my discussion of *Enchanted*, is distinguished by a baseline feminism, as it were, or a basic level of feminist sensibility. The critical feminist romcom, as I will show in my discussion of *Eternal Sunshine*, is distinguished by a more probing investigation of the genre's narrative conventions and ideological underpinnings, mainly in relation to gender. In my close readings of these films, I explain how their narratives are engaged with feminism but in different ways. Enchanted is a metanarrative; it is a story *about* the romance genres it draws from – romantic comedy, fairy tale, and musical fantasy. This film's feminism is most visible in two ways: first, its parodic treatment of these genres – genres, which, as Steve Neale has written, evince a "dominant ideological tendency to counter the threat of female independence and to move women toward traditional female roles", and secondly, its creation of an epistemological rupture in the narrative (298). While I expand on the mechanism and relevance of epistemological rupture in Section II, it will suffice here to describe it as a rift between different ways of knowing or reasoning, which in *Enchanted* takes the form of a complex narrative collision. *Eternal Sunshine*, on the other hand, could be called a surrealist romcom, bringing elements of German Expressionism, postmodernism, and

science fiction to bear on the genre. Its feminism, I suggest, resides in its disruption of narrative linearity, its use of temporal ambiguity, and its subversion of romantic conventionality. In shifting my focus from literature to film in this final chapter of the dissertation, my intention is twofold: to widen the scope of the project to include a narrative form rarely thought of as feminist, and to show how this genre, as well, has at times engaged with Woolf's shadow through its pairing of narrative experimentation with critique. As I intend to show with my readings of these two films, romantic comedy has taken on an increasingly feminist sensibility in recent years. This chapter gives an account of that sensibility, explaining how it manifests in two variations of this narrative genre.

Toward a Theory of Romcom Conventionality

This first section provides a modest history of romantic comedy narrative conventionality. The general origins and development of this conventionality are indeed relevant, as they relate to feminist interventions in the genre described later in the chapter. What follows, then, is intended to show, first, how contemporary romantic comedy remains in dialogue with longstanding narrative traditions in the genre, and secondly, how the feminist sensibility noted above gradually emerges over time, particularly with respect to women's representation. I examine representative films across periods of discernible change over the past century: screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, sex comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, radical comedies of the 1970s, and neo-traditional comedies of the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, I discuss at greater length the film *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), released one decade prior to *Enchanted* and *Eternal* 

Sunshine, before the genre's relation to feminism begins to change in the more marked way I claim—where a baseline or gratuitous feminism becomes more prominent in romcom conventionality. Sleepless in Seattle exemplifies an earlier, more traditional narrative conventionality, using many of the genre's core elements:

boy meets girl, various obstacles prevent them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue [, such as] mistaken identity, disguise and masquerade, intimate tête-à-têtes (often meals), public humiliation, brides bolting from the altar, a race against time, confiding in friends and the 'meet-cute,' ultimately leading to the couple's realisation that they were meant to be together. (Mortimer 4-6)

It is arguably this last narrative feature—two characters' ultimate, seemingly mystical recognition that they belong together—that figures most prominently in *Sleepless in Seattle*. But more generally, this film is a paradigmatic late 20<sup>th</sup> century romcom, in terms of its plot structure, characters, themes and tone. Also, as an immensely popular film the year of its release, *Sleepless in Seattle* may be read to express certain ideas, moods, or attitudes—a cultural hegemony or *zeitgeist*—associated with its period, especially with respect to gender.<sup>8</sup> We can notice, for instance, how its representation of dating, courtship, and domesticity aestheticizes normative gender, and how its nostalgia for old-fashioned romance implies an aversion to feminism. My reading of this film, then, gives an account of its romcom conventionality while also exploring further the genre's relation to feminism.

## Narrative Origins

In the most expansive sense of the term, "romantic comedy" invokes a cluster of narrative traditions with roots at least as far back as William Shakespeare, whose comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594), for instance, contains elements common in both early

and modern romcoms. *The Taming of the Shrew* is even referred to in romcom scholarship as the genre's modern narrative archetype, arriving earlier than other Shakespeare comedies with a similarly enduring influence like A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595) and Much Ado About Nothing (1598). These plays contain a number of narrative elements still common in romantic comedy narratives: the reversal of normative gender roles; playful, erotic quarrels between characters; a plucky, at times extraordinary heroine whose energy is ultimately converted into ardent devotion to her lover. <sup>10</sup> In *The* Taming of the Shrew, its female protagonist, Kate, is not a conventionally feminine character; she is distinctly strong-willed, independent and assertive, qualities more often given to male characters. Kate and her eventual lover, Petruchio, also engage in an ongoing flirtatious banter, with noticeable sexual overtones. There is as well the play's climactic scene, where Kate helps Petruchio, now her husband, win a bet among the other newlywed men by proving that she is the most obedient of the newlywed women. These surface narrative features of the play are enough to bring to mind many popular romcom films over the past century, like It Happened One Night (1934), Some Like It Hot (1959) and She's the Man (2006), which all contain gender reversals and flirtatious repartee evocative of Shakespeare's play.

But *The Taming of the Shrew* even prefigures other, subtler narrative features, as Cherry Potter describes in *I Love You But...Romance, Comedy and the Movies* (2002):

Like Shakespeare's other early comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* stages conflicts between our notions of civilization, morality, gender and our sexual desires [...] and is particularly adept at balancing on the precarious tightrope between the light and dark side of relationships, often causing us both to laugh and gasp as the comedy threatens to topple into tragedy. (xiv-xv)

To make this function of the play clearer, we could notice how its climactic scene where Kate is surprisingly the only woman to come when summoned by her husband, even giving a speech on wifely propriety—balances the lightness of conjugal romance with the darkness of women's subjugation, evoked by the play's title. That is, even as The Taming of the Shrew is structured as a comedy, culminating in a series of weddings, the play also invites a more serious examination of patriarchal custom and gender roles. This tonal or thematic balancing act, where tensions arise from a pairing of romantic conventions with more solemn intimations, which Potter calls a "precarious tightrope" (xv), has long endured as a narrative tradition in romantic comedy. In Billy Wilder's Some Like It Hot, for instance, musicians Jerry and Joe witness a murder and quickly decide to go into hiding dressed in drag, as part of an all-female band on its way to Florida, hoping to remain unrecognizable should the murderers come after them. Even as this film shifts into traditional romcom conventionality, with gender play, sexual tensions, and disguised appearances, there is nevertheless a foreboding in the narrative, as we remain unsure when the murderers will catch up with Jerry and Joe. Along with this threat, the two heroes are also, ironically, subjected to frequent sexual harassment for much of the film, as their drag alter egos—"Josephine" and "Daphne"—attract unwanted, at times aggressive advances from men at the resort where their band performs. This dimension of the film, where it represents an actual social problem within the frame of a larger romantic narrative, makes Some Like It Hot a more direct narrative descendent of The Taming of the Shrew. Whereas Shakespeare's play calls attention to both the cultural practice of arranged marriage and the social power differentials between men and

women, Wilder's film has its cross-dressing male protagonists experience forms of sexism commonly directed at women. In each, the romance and comedy are counterweighted by less whimsical, more provocative narrative elements. This is the dimension of the genre captured by Potter's tightrope analogy: romantic comedy often walks a fine line, balancing the lightness of situational irony and playful humor against hints of darker, more consequential undertones.

### Screwball comedies

This narrative tradition of balancing levity against calamity, furthermore, has endured in romantic comedy throughout its history. To better appreciate this history, and to examine where and how other signature narrative traditions begin to emerge, I will here transition to an overview of the genre's evolution in film, noting in particular when and where we can discern a feminist influence in these films. This account is not meant to imply a strict chronology but rather a more variable, elusive progression of the genre, whose movements can at times be read in relation to social and political change. Looking, then, at the earliest wave of Hollywood romcoms, typically referred to as "screwball" comedies, there is often, as Potter puts it, an "endless series of bewildering and hilarious misunderstandings" between the two primary characters, whose perspectives and desires are initially in conflict (31). The resolution of this conflict, then, becomes the anticipated narrative terminus. For instance, in Howard Hawks' Bringing Up Baby (1938), one of the earliest successful Hollywood romcoms, its wily, audacious heroine Susan Vance effectively courts its comparatively meek hero David Huxley, finding clever, surprising ways to disrupt his life and ultimately win his

affections, even though he is already engaged. Susan, a capricious socialite, and David, a bookish paleontologist, are an example of what Mortimer calls the "warring couple" of romantic comedy, two characters who are "seemingly incongruous yet instantly caught up in each other's lives, as if a net has descended over the two of them, and as they struggle to disentangle themselves they become more caught up in their inevitable shared fate" (32). 12 Here, the incongruity is between David's more staid, workaday demeanor and Susan's more impulsive, lighthearted manner. The film's narrative is structured as a series of increasingly absurd, occasionally tense situations: Susan first mistaking David's golf ball and then his car for her own; a restaurant scene where Susan's dress tears, exposing her undergarments, as David desperately tries to keep her unexposed; Susan then doing anything she can to keep David from attending his own wedding; and perhaps most memorably, David and Susan trying to corral her pet leopard "Baby," who has gotten loose. Over the course of these scenes, the initial, seeming incongruity between the two characters becomes more of a complementarity, David and Susan eventually recognizing in each other the prospect of deeper happiness. In this way, Bringing Up Baby models a fairly conventional narrative progression of the screwball romcom, similar in plot structure to other popular films of the period like *The Thin Man* (1934), *The* Philadelphia Story (1940), and The Lady Eve (1941).

Screwball comedies, moreover, are distinguished in part by two characters first presented as oppositional or even antagonistic, but the narrative ultimately eroticizes these tensions, as conflict gives way to attraction. Leger Grindon, in a section on

screwball films from his book *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy* (2011), writes that the protagonists in these stories

indulge their eccentric battles and discover a sense of fun that set[s] them off from others and confirm[s] their unity in defiance of polite society. The quarrels spark an attraction that eventually reeducate[s] both the man and the woman. The relationship that blossom[s] between them establishe[s] an equality that [breaks] down the social roles dividing the sexes and allow[s] the couple to forge an elevating companionship. (33)

This is true of *Bringing Up Baby*, which builds to a final scene where David admits to Susan that the recent day they spent together—a day that included being arrested and threatened by a wild animal—was "the best day [he] ever had in his whole life." This scene signifies a shift in David's priorities, as he remains surprisingly composed when Susan accidentally causes the collapse of a brontosaurus skeleton he has been working on for four years. The impact of David's newfound affection for Susan could also be an example of what Grindon calls the protagonist's "reeducation," as it becomes clear in this moment that David will no longer put his career aspirations before his romantic prospects. More generally, in typical screwball fashion, *Bringing Up Baby* zig zags through a series of close-calls and tender moments, creating dramatic tension through verbal confusion and situational irony, and concluding with an insinuation that David and Susan have found the "right partner."

This narrative convention of screwball comedy, where there is early antagonism between the eventual lovers, is present as well in Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* (1936), another popular film of the period, though one where class difference—or rather, *perceived* class difference—is the initial source of tension between the romantic leads, Godfrey Parke and Irene Bullock. Whereas in *Bringing Up Baby* there are primarily

differences of personality and priorities between the two main characters, My Man Godfrey draws from its Depression era anxieties to tell a story about an affluent woman's unlikely love for a "forgotten man," used in this period to describe someone marginalized and particularly hard hit by the economic crisis and the worsening social conditions. The film also mocks a capitalist fantasy whereby the wealthy are imbued with a magical power unavailable to the poor: Irene impulsively hires Godfrey as their new butler, effectively saving him from his lowly shanty in a "city dump." Unbeknownst to Irene, however, Godfrey's family is in fact just as wealthy as hers. He has only chosen to live in squalor after a recent personal crisis, involving a break-up and depressive episode. Godfrey had planned to drown himself one night in the East River, near New York City, but on his way met a group of vagrants whose survivalist resolve and undaunted spirit impressed him so deeply that he remained among them, temporarily leaving his wellheeled comforts behind. In this way, My Man Godfrey seems to undermine its own critique of upper-class entitlement and snobbery, as Godfrey himself, not an actual "forgotten man," issues the film's most biting criticisms of the rich, who he calls "emptyheaded nitwits." He is, as Tamar Jeffers McDonald puts it, perhaps "more self-forgetting than forgotten in the topical sense, [which] creates a crucial difference in the political weight the film's narrative can claim" (32). That is, since Godfrey is an imposter, only pretending to be a lowly vagrant, his denunciation of Irene and her elite circle is not as potent as if he were genuinely destitute.

In spite of this problem Jeffers McDonald finds with the film's critical aspirations, the class difference between Godfrey and Irene, while illusory, remains

essential to the film's narrative conventionality, as a screwball comedy. That is, because screwball films normally generate narrative momentum and romantic intrigue from the initial frictions between their lead characters, it is less problematic for the film's genericity to have the frictions revealed as artificial, based on an imagined class difference, not a real one. Irene's eroticized (mis)perception of Godfrey as Other is all that's needed to kindle her affections. Unlike her high society family, he appears a forgotten man—humble, needy, uncared for—and she is curiously turned on by having him as her "responsibility." She announces her intention to have him become her first "protégé," a role where he is expected to provide companionship and entertainment in exchange for her "sponsorship." As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Godfrey's role is more complex than being a butler or protégé. He actually brings a kind of stability and rectitude to the Bullocks' home, conducting himself, as Jeffers McDonald puts it, with more "manners, intelligence and courtesy than [his employers] and is thus in a perfect position to teach them to be better people—far from being their inferior, [Godfrey] would be thus their superior, as they were learning from him" (32). In this way, the Godfrey character typifies another convention of screwball comedies: the gallant romantic hero with the power to single-handedly reconcile conflict. Godfrey's good business sense, for instance, has a heroic function in the narrative, as his secret investment saves Irene's family from financial ruin. Mortimer notes as well that Godfrey's character type, within screwball comedy, is more generally presented as a "knight in shining armour who can offer moral certainty and structure where [others] have failed" (24). Given the Depression-era social conditions into which these films

were released, it was perhaps unsurprising, from a historical perspective, for audiences to latch onto a hero figure like Godfrey, whose powers of reconciliation and redemption offered a salve at a time when social morale was low. From the perspective of romcom conventionality, though, Godfrey's characterization—composed, decorous, prudent—must be drawn in contrast to Irene's, which is bold, whimsical, and at times melodramatic. The screwball comedy is largely distinguished by this initiatory tension between these two conventional character types.

Just as with *Bringing Up Baby*, then, *My Man Godfrey* positions its two main characters as foils, and as unlikely romantic partners, but the longer they spend together, the more their differences resolve into mutual attraction. This convention of the screwball romcom is not the only one well demonstrated by these two films. La Cava's comedy is also similar to Hawks' in featuring a headstrong, self-determined female protagonist, a character type used prominently in many screwball films. Susan Vance and Irene Bullock first seem to be latter-day New Woman figures, which, as Ruth Bordin explains, were "women of affluence and sensitivity, who despite or perhaps because of their wealth exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own, [...] women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic" (2). But as much as these screwball heroines accord with Bordin's description, their narrative trajectories actually suggest something other than the New Woman figure, whose prevalence in American culture is closer to the 1910s and 1920s. For in spite of their free spirit and self-determination, Susan and Irene are ultimately

given a noticeably traditional denouement, where their fate in the narrative feels overdetermined, or intended to gratify a particular sensibility.

Critics have offered varying assessments of the screwball comedy's tendency to have its heroine's narrative arc resolve in such a trivial, uneventful way, even when her characterization may prefigure something more interesting or subversive. Mortimer says of screwball comedies that "the narratives of these films, in impelling the heroine towards the resolution of marriage, serves to reinforce the status quo, [where the] destabilising force of the independent woman is brought back into the fold, under the guidance of a new father figure in the form of her husband-to-be" (24). Grindon disagrees, interpreting this narrative tendency of the screwball film in a more charitable, sanguine way:

The relationship that blossomed between [the male and female protagonists] established an equality that broke down the social roles dividing the sexes and allowed the couple to forge an elevating companionship [, their] prospective marriage promis[ing] a union that honor[s] each as autonomous individuals and [finds] its joy in their special partnership; child rearing and family values were beside the point. (Grindon 33)

Whether we regard this narrative resolution as something that perpetuates or undermines the status quo, what I would underscore here is this point of contact—within a romcom narrative—between a screwball convention and an invocation of normative femininity. That is, the conventional screwball heroine, in spite of being characteristically "exuberant and forceful" (Mortimer 22), becomes more resigned as her narrative concludes, more oriented towards a traditional feminine role. In *Bringing Up Baby*, for instance, Susan is eager to determine, in the film's final scene, whether David is in love with her, as she is with him. Technically, this is the precise conclusion called for by a romantic comedy, screwball or otherwise, but since, for much of this story, Susan is presented as firmly and

happily independent, it is curious that her denouement implies "she can only attain happiness through having the love of a man" (Mortimer 21). Even as a constitutive element of the genre, this ending is in tension with Susan's characterization, as it contradicts the various demonstrations of her self-contentment and self-determination in the narrative, such as her golfing alone, her playful manipulation of David, and her unaided, cunning escape from Constable Slocum's jail. The ending feels more teleological than poetic, driven more by ideological pressures—entailed by the genre—to have the heroine surrender to a social imperative to marry than by characterological expectations—entailed by Susan's behaviors throughout the film—to have the heroine remain unattached and unencumbered. Susan, like most screwball heroines, is an "unconventional woman [...] assertive, self-reliant, and intelligent" (Grindon 32). But this unconventional character is given a deeply conventional narrative resolution, her marriage symbolizing her ultimate forfeiture of a non-normative femininity.

This dissonance, then, between the screwball heroine's characteristic independence and her abrupt ceding of that independence is significant because it gives some indication of romcom culture's relation to feminism in these years. To be clear, even as these two spheres—romantic comedy and feminism—were largely separate during this period, both were nevertheless involved in a common objective: the furtherance and variation of women's representation. In each, there is an aspiration to reclaim women's social power and cultural influence, an aspiration both expressive of and responsive to women's changing social conditions in the period. Still, in the 1930s, when both *Bringing Up Baby* and *My Man Godfrey* were released, feminism's larger

influence in popular culture remained relatively minor. The feminist sensibility that would come to typify later periods of romantic comedy had yet to prevail upon the culture of Hollywood, as many films in this period did more to deflect than engage with feminism. Feminist art historian Cassandra Langer, in A Feminist Critique (1996), argues, for instance, that films produced during the 1930s and 1940s—often referred to as the golden age of the Hollywood studio system—had a particular "socializing" effect, "perpetuating [...] certain feminine types and role models" and "progressively arresting attempts to deal responsibly with women's issues" (78). The screwball heroine's characteristic preoccupation with courtship and marriage, as a narrative convention, is one such mode of perpetuating ideas about femininity. Langer even notes a "matrimonial imperative" in films about women, which "the movie moguls themselves helped to support [...] by disapproving of women who challenged marital bonds" (78). This doesn't quite account, however, for the boldness and free-spiritedness we see with Susan Vance and Irene Bullock, even if these character traits are most prominent when each is pursuing marriage. Screwball heroines, as Mortimer puts it, tend to be "crazy and unpredictable," which is different from the more staid, uncontroversial representations of femininity Langer describes (21). This difference, therefore, may elicit the dissonance noted above, where these early romcom heroines are eager to relinquish the very independence that defines them. I would suggest further that this dissonance indicates an ambivalence within these narratives: there is an acknowledgment of feminine variability but also a reassertion of the feminine normativity deemed pleasing to Hollywood. In this earliest phase of the romcom genre, then, female protagonists may have been "spirited

and determined," but their valiancy was often treated as "a threat to society," only surmountable through "the restraints of marriage" (Mortimer 21).

Gradually, though, feminism's impact on Hollywood began to emerge more fully. Marjorie Rosen, in her book *Popcorn Venus* (1973), a comprehensive study of women's representation in Hollywood throughout history, begins her chapter on the 1930s by observing that "movies [of this period] portrayed women working by their wits," where they appeared as "detectives, spies, con artists, private secretaries, molls, and especially reporters and editors" (140). These narrative representations are generally positive, for Rosen. She calls these characters "breezy" and "gutsy" but also underscores their belatedness, in terms of historical accuracy:

Unfortunately, if [these] films were to truly reflect the image of women in society, this development ought to have occurred a decade earlier when it was directly relevant. Now it was a belated distortion of the truth of women's social role. In the name of escapism, films were guilty of extravagant misrepresentations, exuding a sense of well-being to the nation in general and women in particular. In fact, precisely the opposite was true. (140)

The distortion Rosen describes has to do with women's actual social conditions during the Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 until the late 1930s, when the screwball era of romantic comedy began. The appearance of women in these new cinematic roles Rosen describes, then, is important as a form of positive representation, but it doesn't necessarily correspond to the lived experience of many women during this period. Sex comedies

The same cannot be as easily said of female characters from the next distinctive era of romantic comedy films, which began to appear in the early to mid-1950s. These "sex comedies," as they would come to be called, contain elements of both realism and

fantasy, though the line between the two is not always clear. For instance, since the sex comedy heroine is often unmarried and sexually adventurous, one could conclude that these are escapist narratives, proffering forms of cinematic fantasy to women in traditional marriages. However, such a conclusion disregards a noteworthy development during this period, with respect to what was being learned in the 1950s about women's sexual behaviors. Specifically, the sex comedy era coincided with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953), which included among its findings that half of American women were having non-marital sex. While generally unstartling to a 21st century audience, this finding provoked "mingled shock, outrage and prurient excitement" upon the book's initial release (Jeffers McDonald 41). Kinsey's report, then, could be regarded as a kind of corroboration of female characters' sexual behaviors in popular, midcentury romcoms. That is, sex comedies were much more verisimilar than its first audiences may have even known, its representation of female sexual behavior somehow corresponding to the empirical observations that informed Kinsey's report.

Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960), for instance, features an unmarried, sexually active heroine, Fran Kubelik. While the film's ending does imply that Fran will marry, or at least begin dating Bud Baxter, the story's protagonist, her unmarried status isn't treated with the kind of urgency or alarm we find in screwball comedies, where singlehood for women of a certain age is presented as a kind of social crisis. Susan Vance and Irene Bullock, we recall, go to great lengths to resolve this crisis, their outrageous and at times untoward behaviors either born of traditional pressures for

women to wed or of chastened sexual desires. Fran's narrative arc, alternately, is less encumbered by a prescriptive feminine ideal. Even in the original screenplay for Wilder's film, we notice how the writers quickly establish Fran's uniqueness among others, as in this initial description of her character:

The elevator doors open, revealing the operator. She is in her middle twenties and her name is FRAN KUBELIK. Maybe it's the way she's put together, maybe it's her face, or maybe it's just the uniform -- in any case, there is something very appealing about her. She is also an individualist -- she wears a carnation in her lapel, which is strictly against regulations. As the elevator loads, she greets the passengers cheerfully.

These details – Fran's individuality, her willingness to break rules – are indeed traditional romcom heroine traits, but *The Apartment*, as a departure from screwball comedy, loosens the narrative strictures often imposed by this genre on women's sexuality. Fran is single, has sex, and remains unwed at the film's conclusion. Additionally, the film decouples sex from marriage more generally by representing a transactional dimension of sex: Bud sublets his apartment to his adulterous male superiors who need a place to bring dates, and in exchange Bud receives favorable treatment and promotion at work. It isn't just Fran, then, who is having extramarital sex in this film; the male characters are as well. Unlike Fran, though, these men are all married, so while this film's treatment of sex was, broadly speaking, considered edgy or subversive, there remains a greater sexual freedom reserved for men, reflective of enduring gender inequalities in the 1950s.

Still, as romantic comedies, films like *The Apartment* are significant for representing women's sexuality with increasing candor and nuance, even as a matrimonial imperative persisted in the genre's conventionality. Hollywood's more libertine engagement with sex in this period is attributable in part to what Tamar Jeffers

McDonald calls a "new climate of anxiety and excitement over sexuality, both female and male" (41). Kinsey's report was really only one part of a confluence of factors that drove this change in attitudes towards and interests in sex. McDonald notes, for instance, the impact of the first issue of *Playboy* in December of 1953 (42). While clearly designed to appeal to men, *Playboy* nevertheless contributed, more generally, to this new climate of freer sexual expression and representation. The magazine also leveraged sexual content as a marketing instrument, using suggestive images of women to advertise popular products like cigarettes, liquor and cars. Significantly, this pairing of sexual imagery with consumer goods was common as well in Hollywood productions of this period, particularly romantic comedies. There's even a sense in which *Playboy* worked in concert with these films: both featured images of particular products being used -atelevision, a brand of whiskey, a stereo system – often within a carefully furnished "bachelor pad," a concept whose prominence in popular culture was aided by the magazine. <sup>13</sup> In an article on this dynamic between 1950s men's magazines and masculinized consumerism, Bill Osgerby explains how *Playboy* created a distinctive aesthetic, which had at its center this fetishized masculine dwelling:

*Playboy*'s features [...] deployed a variety of aesthetic codes to stress the 'masculine' character of its engagement with consumerism. The regular interior designs, for example, were chic and elegant, but also carefully incorporated an iconography of status and power to underline the masculine and heterosexual integrity of the archetypal 'bachelor pad.' (100)

Osgerby's characterization of this space as archetypal is especially accurate given the bachelor pad's distinctive narrative resonance. That is, beneath these images of fashionable domestic spaces, a deeper story was being told about contemporary

masculinity. *Playboy*'s tactic, as Osgerby explains, was to construct an entire identity — the "man about town" — whose home would signify his power, refinement and virility (100). A bachelor pad's aspirational inhabitant, the magazine implied, was "affluent and independent, with a sense of individuality crafted around fashionable display and the pleasures of commodity consumption—yet this was also a man who took care that his aesthetic tastes marked him out as avowedly heterosexual and resolutely 'manful'" (100). The specificity in this description begins to resemble a character sketch, giving this new image of chic maleness a natural appeal and utility for film narrative.

As *Playboy* proffered these masculine codes and iconography in a static medium, a popular romcom like Michael Gordon's *Pillow Talk* (1959) presented even more engaging and dynamic images. To give just a basic plot overview, *Pillow Talk* tells the story of musician Brad Allen and interior decorator Jan Morrow. As the film begins, the two characters have never met face to face but share a "party line" – a single phone line shared by multiple users, common in the 1940s and 1950s – and quickly get into an argument over Brad's frequent use of the line. His numerous female callers have Jan convinced Brad is a "sex maniac," as she describes him to her phone service's representative. After days of heated banter and rising tension, Brad has a chance encounter with Jan and is immediately smitten. But upon first speaking to her, he assumes a Texas accent and says his name is Rex Stetson, lest Jan recognize his voice. Jan eventually discovers the truth behind his elaborate ruse and is heartbroken, but Brad ultimately wins back her affection in the film's final scenes. As a sex comedy, *Pillow Talk* contains many of the narrative features found in this iteration of the genre: use of

disguise to advance sexual motives, protagonists who initially dislike each other, a speech criticizing marriage, insults and embarrassments, and strikingly modern apartment settings. <sup>14</sup> The style of Brad's apartment (see fig. 1), for instance, corresponds to the era's bachelor pad aesthetic. The magazine's influence on the film is even clearer in a 1962 feature in *Playboy* on "posh urban living" (see fig. 2). The muted color palette, spiral loft stairway, modern furniture, wall décor, reading materials—these elements comprise a distinct look shared by the film set design and the magazine artist's rendering.



Fig. 1. Pillow Talk



Fig. 2. "The Playboy Town House: Posh Plans for Exciting Urban Living."

In addition to this aesthetic or cinematographic function of the bachelor pad, it also has a particular narrative significance for romcom conventionality in the sex comedy era. In *Pillow Talk*, Brad's apartment is effectively an instrument of seduction. From its crackling fireplace to its posh furniture to its stylish wall décor, the apartment becomes an erotic backdrop for Brad's sexual conquests. It is the embodiment of a masculine fantasy of the postwar era, which Osgerby calls "a place where [a man] could luxuriate in [...] sybaritic indulgence" (99). Brad's home also represents his attachment to singlehood. In one scene, set in his apartment, Brad's old college friend Jonathan Forbes gently encourages him to consider marrying and starting a family:

JONATHAN. You ought to quit all this chasing around and get married.

BRAD. Why?

JONATHAN. Why?...You're not getting any younger, fella. Oh, sure, it's fun, it's exciting...dancing, nightclubbing with a different doll every night. But there comes a time when a man wants to give up that kind of life.

BRAD. Why?

JONATHAN. Because he wants to create a stable, lasting relationship with one person. Brad, believe me, there is nothing in this world so wonderful, so fulfilling, as coming home to the same woman every night.

BRAD. Why?

JONATHAN. Because that's what it means to be adult. A wife, a family, a house. A mature man wants those responsibilities.

BRAD. Why?

JONATHAN. Well, if you want to, you can find tricky arguments against anything.

Brad's innocence is disingenuous here, an affect meant to spare him the unpleasantness of answering for his wanton lifestyle. Rather than engaging in this conversation, that is, Brad generally stonewalls Jonathan, pretending to be unfamiliar with one's reasons for marrying. But when Brad eventually does reveal his thoughts on marriage, in the form of a strange, extended lumber metaphor, we notice that his aversion arises from an imagined change to his living space. He tells Jonathan that,

before a man gets married, he's like a tree in the forest. He stands there independent, an entity unto himself. And then he's chopped down, his branches are cut off, he's stripped of his bark, and he's thrown into the river with the rest of the logs. Then this tree is taken to the mill. And when it comes out, it is no longer a tree. It's the vanity table, the breakfast nook, the baby crib, and the newspaper that lines the family garbage can.

Brad's images of a dismembered tree certainly evoke some castration anxiety, marriage being regarded as diminishment or emasculation, but narratively speaking, I would note the curious pairing of character and setting in this moment. What first seems merely an enduring attachment to his bachelorhood begins here to function as a kind of narcissism. Brad sees in his swanky apartment an idealized reflection of himself, which may explain his reluctance to tamper with or cede control of this space. The new domestic space he associates with marriage – a vanity table instead of a liquor cabinet, a baby crib instead of a parlor table – not only threatens his lifestyle but his identity as well. The film implies, moreover, that Brad's apartment is an extension or manifestation of his character.

Because the bachelor pad in *Pillow Talk* represents undomesticated masculinity, it is only fitting that its heroine will ultimately seize control of this space and refashion it as something unrecognizable. In the film's final act, as a last-ditch effort to keep Jan in his life, Brad hires her company to redecorate his apartment, anticipating that Jan will be the

one given the assignment. In a vindictive but playful move, Jan transforms Brad's voguish bachelor pad into what looks like a harem (see fig. 3), at least in terms of this space's popular representation in the West (see fig. 4). Jan's strategy here is twofold: to strip Brad's apartment of its charm, rendering it unusable for his bachelor lifestyle, and secondly, to mock Brad's years of promiscuity by choosing a style of décor associated with sexual excess and female servitude. *Pillow Talk*'s central narrative conflict resolves



Fig. 3. Pillow Talk



Fig. 4. "Le harem sur le bosphore." Louis Tesson (1820-1870).

by having Brad finally release his attachment to an overlong bachelorhood and discover the pleasures of an exclusive relationship. The time he spends courting Jan, while incognito as Rex, affords Brad a more mature perspective on romance. Jan notices this change in him and is ultimately able to forgive his past misbehaviors. The film concludes with a brief scene, set three months beyond the bachelor pad transformation, where Brad reveals he and Jan are expecting a baby, implying they have married. Even in a film whose male protagonist is an obstinate Lothario, the matrimonial imperative supersedes any possibility of prolonged singlehood.

Pillow Talk is not as racy as other sex comedies, whose narratives are typically more oriented towards sexual innuendo and bawdy humor, but its main characters are nevertheless distinguishable from earlier screwball protagonists. Like Fran from *The Apartment*, Jan is single, sexually active, and not urgently preoccupied with finding a husband. Her sexual desire is readily acknowledged in the narrative, as when she accompanies Brad to Connecticut and fantasizes about lustfully serenading him. Jan's song is unsubtle in its sexual overture:

Hold me tight and kiss me right, I'm yours tonight My darling, possess me!

Tenderly, and breathlessly, make love to me,
My darling possess me!

Near to me, when you are near to me, my heart forgets to beat!

The candor of Jan's desire is a departure from the more understated, suggestive romantic gestures made by romcom heroines of past decades. In part due to Hays Code restrictions but also to a more corseted romcom culture, sexual desire in earlier romcoms is conventionally implicit or symbolic and would not be rendered as explicitly as in Jan's

song. *Bringing Up Baby* is a good example, where David's coveted missing dinosaur bone—a phallic object—is found and returned by Susan. Her gesture satiates David's lack, implying that she can gratify other needs as well. *Pillow Talk*, alternately, does not rely on these figurative hints and cues in its treatment of sexual desire. The film contains sexually explicit situations and dialogue, while not yet going as far as depicting actual sex acts. As McDonald notes, even though romcoms like *Pillow Talk* are called sex comedies, "their date of production and targeted general audience ensures there is going to be very little actual sex in them" (43). Even as the Hays Code became more lenient in the 1960s, permitting "discussion and narrativization of sexual topics, it still successfully forbade the visualization of them" (McDonald 43). Explicit sexual content would not begin to appear in American films until the late 1960s and early 1970s. 16

The sex comedies I've examined, furthermore, introduce a different romcom conventionality and a different relation to feminism. Narratively, these films reflect a more cynical attitude towards romance, even as a deeper matrimonial imperative effectively predetermines how these stories will end. Fran of *The Apartment* has a dourness about her, having been mistreated by her former lover. Jan of *Pillow Talk*, while ultimately inclined to marry, earlier tells Alma, her maid, that she likes living alone and being single. There is an emerging wariness towards marriage in these films, particularly among female characters. These narratives also contain what Deleyto calls "privileged sites," which he explains as distinctive spaces within romcom narratives allowing for critical examination of cultural conventions, and which "are often more telling and significant than the endings" ("The Secret Life" 175). One example from

Pillow Talk is a series of encounters between minor characters Alma and Harry, the elevator operator for Jan's apartment building. The first time we see these two characters, Jan is waiting on her floor for the elevator, and as the doors open, Alma appears inside gripping the handrail to avoid falling over. She staggers out of the elevator, towards Jan's apartment, and Harry remarks, "that's a peach of a hangover she's got this morning." The film establishes that Alma has a drinking problem, and over the course of the narrative, Alma's alcoholism becomes an object of ridicule. Whenever there is a scene where she emerges from the elevator, Harry casts a critical gaze at her, and the non-diegetic music cues are playful and mocking. Within the narrative space conjured by this film, Alma represents a sad singlehood for women, perhaps meant as a cautionary glimpse of what Jan's life could become were she to persist in her current lifestyle. Ultimately, though, in the final elevator scene, Harry decides to speak more candidly to Alma, revealing both his love for her and his attachment to patriarchal gender roles: "You're too nice a looking woman to go out drinking every night. You know, what you need is a man to take care of. Then you wouldn't have so much time to drink." Alma is flattered by Harry's gesture, and as he helps lift her to her feet, she says, "Why, Harry, you're so strong." In this secondary narrative arc, the film explores the possibility of a woman remaining unwed well into middle age. Alma is represented as joyless, embittered and lonely. She tells Jan at one point, "if there's anything worse than a woman living alone, it's a woman saying she likes it." By characterizing Alma as this drunken spinster, who admonishes Jan to prioritize marriage above all else, the film implies that a woman's happiness depends on her securing a husband. So even as the sex comedy iteration of romantic comedy presented more nuanced characters and narratives, reflective of changing sexual mores in American culture and an approaching, larger sexual revolution in the 1960s, the genre remained tethered to a matrimonial imperative and largely unaffected by a feminist movement entering its second wave. As Grindon puts it, "the closing union [between the sex comedy's protagonists] becomes more of a convention of the genre than the heartfelt wedding of ideal mates" (50). The heroines of *The Apartment* and *Pillow Talk* are strong, independent women, but romcom conventionality in this period continued to constrain and circumscribe the plot trajectories of these films, leaving fewer narrative pathways and outcomes for these characters.

Many critics posit a correlation between the decline of the sex comedy and the growing availability of the birth control pill in the early 1960s. McDonald writes that "the particular context in which the mid-century sex comedy flourished ended when the contraceptive pill became an accepted fact" (55). Along the same lines, Grindon notes that the arrival of "the pill" meant that "virginity no longer carried such a high premium for women" and that "sexual ethics relaxed" (50). Sexuality itself, a form of intimacy often postponed until marriage, became more of "an end in itself," as Grindon adds, "rather than a means towards unifying the couple and establishing a family" (51). One consequence for romantic comedy was that courtship, as a long-standing conventional element of the genre, came to be regarded more as a gratuitous component, and less as a basic structure, in the narrativization of romance. Gloria Steinem, for instance, in a 1962 essay entitled "The Moral Disarmament of Betty Coed," admonished storytellers to do away with old-fashioned, stereotypical narrative frames given to women: "Writers in or

out of Hollywood should be warned that they can no longer build plots on loss of virginity or fainting pregnant heroines and expect to be believed" (155). Additionally, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a foundational text for the second wave of American feminism, engendered a new skepticism towards marriage, encouraging women to consider whether the feminine role they'd been ushered towards had proven satisfying. Friedan writes that "[women] can no longer ignore that voice within [...] that says: I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (32). While the impact of Steinem's and Friedan's work, and the larger feminist movement they contributed to, were certainly not the only developments that impacted romantic comedy in the 1960s, these factors had a special significance for the genre. Specifically, creating a film narrative about courtship and marriage, even a deeply comedic one, becomes more complicated when part of the film's audience begins to distrust or reject traditional romantic practices.

## Radical comedies

Out of this confluence of changing sexual mores and revised romantic ideals, consequently, there arose a new iteration of romcom commonly called the "radical romantic comedy," which McDonald describes as a narrative "willing to abandon the emphasis on making sure the couple ends up together, regardless of likelihood, instead striving to interrogate the ideology of romance" (59). In radical romcoms, there is a new "emphasis on balancing the competing claims of realism and romance" (McDonald 80). While screwball and sex comedies each contain nuanced, at times provocative representations of women, these radical romcoms are also arguably the first in the genre

to reflect a more obvious feminist influence. That is, as feminism shone a light on long-standing, persistent forms of gender-based discrimination—in hiring practices, college admissions, workers' wages, credit applications, parenting rights, social security eligibility—a new narrative sensibility and aesthetic arose within romantic comedies, more responsive to forms of social progress in this period.<sup>17</sup>

First appearing in the late 1960s but not reaching greatest popularity until the mid 1970s, these new romcoms were considered radical in part because many contained a more aggressive questioning of relationship norms and gender roles. Some of Paul Mazursky's films, for instance, can be read as narrative interventions in romcom conventionality. Mazursky's Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice (1969) is significant for its liberal treatment of adultery, where extramarital affairs are less a relationship-threatening crisis than an occasion for couples to explore private desires and deepen intimacy, the film in some ways anticipating later cultural phenomena like polyamory. 18 It's a narrative premise that even by today's standards could be considered radical. Mazursky also directed An Unmarried Woman (1978), another romcom about adultery, but here, the focus is on a woman's self-determination and sexual autonomy, as protagonist Erica Benton divorces her unfaithful husband, receives psychological counseling, begins to date again, and ultimately chooses singlehood over the prospect of reuniting with her contrite ex-husband. Romcom conventionality, one notices, is not entirely abandoned in either of these films, as they each contain multiple generic narrative features: situational irony paired with romantic tension, fluctuating antagonism and attraction between romantic partners; unrequited love; or a plot structure culminating in the attainment of

new romantic wisdom. Even as radical romantic comedy forges beyond the genre's conventional narrative terrain, most of these films continue to deploy familiar romantic tropes and comedic tactics.

But this persistence of traditional narrative conventions in the genre, even as it takes a "radical" turn, is joined by a more general tonal shift, where romance itself is no longer treated teleologically, as an end in and of itself. The radical romcom is often suspicious of or derisive towards romance, and much more starkly than in *The Apartment* or *Pillow Talk*, which both ultimately treat romantic love as a panacea for narrative conflict. Only romantic love, these earlier comedies imply, can mitigate the abject miseries of singlehood and set one on a path to a meaningful life. Even in the Mazursky films noted above, the divergence from romcom tradition is only partial: the protagonists of these stories, while obviously given new and provocative narrative possibilities, remain in thrall to romance's charms. In order to make this tonal shift in the genre more evident, I will briefly examine here two further examples of the radical romcom, Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967) and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). Released a decade apart, these two films are markedly cynical towards romantic love, and they also, in ways I'll explain presently, reflect an early feminist sensibility in the genre.

The Graduate, an adaptation of Charles Webb's 1963 novella of the same name, is somewhat unrecognizable as a romantic comedy, much of its narrative given a more dramatic or meditative tone. The story is largely centered upon protagonist Benjamin ("Ben") Braddock's struggles to make the transition out of his collegiate years and into some semblance of "adulthood." Adulthood is in quotations because even though Ben is

21 years old and coming of age, he regards this next life phase as a set of unanswered questions posed by others. In an early sequence, at a party thrown by Ben's parents to celebrate his college graduation, he's accosted by party guest after party guest, each enjoining Ben to divulge his post-collegiate plans:

LADY 1. Ben - we're all so proud of you.

LADY 2. Proud, proud, proud, proud.

LADY 3. What are you going to do now?

BEN. I was going to go upstairs for a minute -

LADY 3. - I meant with your future.

LADY 2. With your life.

BEN. Well – that's a little hard to say -

Other characters appear, similarly interrogating Ben or offering him unsolicited advice. Ben's weariness and apprehension are the immediate focus, creating an unconventional starting point for a romcom. Quickly, though, the narrative takes a surprising romantic turn as Ben is soon seduced by Mrs. Robinson, the wife of his father's business partner and the mother of his high school classmate, Elaine. Mrs. Robinson is "twice as old" as Ben, her sexual maturity and general boldness set in contrast with the inexperience and reluctance of her eventual lover. The film generates comedic tension by dwelling in the gap in romantic maturity between the two characters. Mrs. Robinson is cunning and graceful, as though she knows how to plot and conceal an affair. Ben is clumsy and naïve, relying on his lover to guide him and correct his missteps.

The pairing of unlikely lovers is indeed a romcom convention, but there are two ways that this specific pairing is more radical and more feminist. First, having a married woman seduce a man young enough to be her son is generally beyond the pale for romantic comedy, even in an increasingly liberal Hollywood culture during these years. The film also playfully accentuates Ben and Mrs. Robinson's age difference by having him only ever refer to her as "Mrs. Robinson," as though he cannot relax the social practice of respecting both her seniority and her marital status, even after they become sexual partners. Secondly, Mrs. Robinson is given a degree of sexual license far less conditional or restrained than what we find with traditional romcom heroines. In screwball and sex comedies, the heroine's singlehood is typically remarked upon early in the film or at the very least implied, as in *Bringing Up Baby* and *Pillow Talk*. Singlehood, for these female characters, tends to suggest chastity, which has a corollary insinuation of sex being consigned to betrothal or marriage. Mrs. Robinson's deviation from this romantic norm is radical in that her sexual behavior is unbound by the kind of feminine propriety often invoked in romcoms. Her characterization, I would suggest, is of a piece with the countercultural sensibility evoked in Steinem's "Betty Coed" essay, where she asserts that "women's sexual freedom is a frightening development [and] difficult to accept" (154). In a reversal of the phallocentric binary, where men are presumed active and women passive, Mrs. Robinson is positioned as a sexual instigator. Or, as Deleyto says of unconventional romcom heroines, she "takes the lead in the performance of desire [...] mak[ing] the film's sexual discourse a relatively extreme form of the sexual liberation sought by feminist discourses, because [...] the very idea of

female commitment to sexual pleasure was then, and still is now, threatening to many men and women" ("The Secret Life" 80). *The Graduate*'s liberal representation of female sexual desire, then, is in line with both the romcom genre's shift into edgier narratives as well as with feminist calls for greater sexual freedoms for women.

My earlier point about this film being fairly unrecognizable as a romcom is in relation to romcom narrative structure. The Graduate is unconventional—and indeed radical—in this regard, its opening act containing none of the traditional narrative overtures in the genre: initial encounter of romantic protagonists, a protagonist paired with the "wrong partner," mistaken identity and disguise, the introduction of a barrier preventing the romantic couple's marriage, among others. 19 The film's first act is dedicated instead to Ben's characterization and the beginning of his affair with Mrs. Robinson. Ben's actual love interest, Elaine, does not appear in the film until beyond the midpoint. It's much more common, even in many radical romcoms, to have the central romantic couple meet at least once in the film's first act—so common, in fact, that there is a familiar narrative device in the genre called a "meet-cute." Mortimer calls this a "defining moment of the romcom," occurring "when the couple first encounter each other, generally in comic and prophetic circumstances" (5-6). Narratively, the meet-cute is often an initiatory mechanism, establishing a tension between two characters and making their eventual love seem unlikely. This is the narrative progression, for instance, of Bringing Up Baby, My Man Godfrey, and Pillow Talk. In The Graduate, however, Ben and Mrs. Robinson's first appearance together is not a meet-cute. The tension established between them, when Mrs. Robinson enters Ben's bedroom during his parents' party, is a bit of narrative misdirection since these two characters will not become a couple. Their relationship, rather, is ultimately a source of narrative conflict, as Elaine is later dismayed that Ben, now her suitor, has had an extramarital affair with her own mother. This narrative strategy, moreover, of deferring revelation of the true romantic hero and heroine is both surprising and strategic: it thwarts audience expectations in order to deepen the sense of irony produced by the film's strange final act, when Ben and Elaine hurriedly fall in love.

Once *The Graduate* hastens to its endpoint, as Ben must secure Elaine's forgiveness and win her affection, the film begins to deploy familiar romcom narrative conventions while also adding radical touches which, taken together, amount to a commentary on the genre itself. In terms of romcom conventionality, the final act of this film contains some of the traditional features of the genre missing from earlier sections. Ben takes Elaine on a first date, albeit at the behest of his parents. There is an initial antagonism between the two characters, as Ben chooses a burlesque show for the date, where he is rude to Elaine and has to beg her to stay out with him. Ben lies to Elaine about the identity of his recent lover, knowing that the truth would appall her. There is the fateful revelation of Ben's affair with Elaine's mother, which drives Elaine to date, and ultimately become engaged to, Carl Smith, a longtime family friend. And there is Ben's abrupt announcement to his parents that he intends to marry Elaine, even though he has yet to propose, and she remains dismayed by the revelation of his affair. These traditional romcom conventions—courtship, a lovers' quarrel, concealment of an

explosive secret, a wedding announcement—are curiously fleeting, their briefness undercutting a significance normally associated with these narrative elements.

The film's treatment of these conventions is also vaguely cynical, in line with the radical romcom tonal shift from idealistic towards darker, more sardonic narratives. Ben begins courting Elaine, for instance, to placate his parents, not because he finds her attractive, and the swiftness with which Elaine agrees to marry Carl—a character who only appears briefly in the film—feels absurd alongside her measured, circumspect response to Ben's proposal. The most radical element, however, comes at the film's conclusion, shortly after Ben has suddenly interrupted Elaine and Carl's wedding by banging on a window above the ceremony and screaming her name repeatedly. As Ben and Elaine successfully hail a bus and take its last open seats, having dramatically fled the scene of the wedding, their apparent jubilation slowly turns to a look of apprehension or regret. The other bus passengers gaze at them with bewilderment, unable to discern the circumstances of Ben and Elaine's sudden appearance. The romantic protagonists are at last together, safely away from conflict in this final scene, as in the vast majority of romcoms. But instead of letting the catharsis and elation of their escape be the final narrative stroke, Nichols lingers on a close shot of the lovers, their heads nearly filling the frame (see fig. 5). There is a reprise of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of



Fig. 5. The Graduate.

Silence," a somber ballad about a cancerous, inexplicable silence. Meanwhile, Ben and Elaine both force a smile before relaxing into a blank forward stare, the film's final image a shot from behind the bus as it moves away. In the film's closing moments, then, we are made to feel the awkwardness and uncertainty of Ben and Elaine's choices, as opposed to the lightness and optimism traditionally given to the romcom finale. By punctuating the film's most romantic sequence with a note of despair and ambiguity, Nichols breaks with conventionality in an unsettling and radical way, which can be read as a critique of the genre's traditional style of narrative closure.

While *The Graduate* serves as an example of early narrative experimentation in romantic comedy, signaling a shift towards more radical iterations of the genre, *Annie Hall* demonstrates an even more pronounced form of the radical romcom. But even as Allen's film pushes the boundaries of the genre further, it also contains some of the essential romcom narrative conventions, showing Allen's own familiarity with and respect for this narrative tradition. For instance, *Annie Hall* has a meet-cute, when the two protagonists—Alvy Singer and Annie Hall—are introduced just before playing doubles tennis with mutual friends. The film also centers sexual desire as a source of

narrative conflict, in ways that call to mind the sex comedies of the 1950s and 1960s. Here, though, conflict arises from asymmetries between Alvy and Annie's (as well as Alvy's previous wives') *interest* in—and preferred conditions for—sex as opposed to earlier, comparatively modest sex comedies where conflict often simply arises from unconsummated sexual desire, as in *Pillow Talk* and *Some Like It Hot*. There is additionally a brief courtship arc in *Annie Hall*, as Alvy and Annie's first meeting at tennis quickly develops into an invitation to her apartment for wine, a date at a nightclub where Annie sings, their first time sleeping together, subsequent dates, Alvy meeting Annie's family, and exchanged professions of love. In standard romcom form, Alvy and Annie's relationship is built through their differences, a vacillation between attraction and aversion, desire and doubt.

In spite of its fidelity to the genre's narrative traditions, however, this film is reflective of different sensibilities. For instance, even though Annie's characterization—whimsical, fast-talking, exuberant—has a screwball quality, she is more a product of the period's rising feminist sentiments. In Deleyto's reading of the film, he notes how Annie

takes the initiative in making contact; she owns the car and drives aggressively through Manhattan traffic while Alvy cowers; she invites him up to her apartment for a drink. Her masculine vest, fedora, and tie challenge gender boundaries while highlighting her beauty. Though naive and wacky, she is emboldened by her emigration to New York and her strength and independence shine from beneath her wavering confidence. (153)

In addition to this different take on the romcom heroine, the film has a more general radicalness in its narrative structure. As an example, there is the film's immediate revelation, in Alvy's opening confessional, that the romantic protagonists will ultimately separate, circumventing the genre's basic matrimonial imperative. The dramatic intrigue,

therefore, comes not from whether Alvy and Annie will become a couple but from why their relationship failed. Given that the eventual, affirmed union of the couple is about as essential to the genre as any other element—even in radical romcoms, like *The* Graduate—this modification is indeed surprising, but it is by no means the film's only narrative modification, nor arguably the most surprising. Building on the radical romcom's tonal shift to more meditative narratives, Annie Hall utilizes forms of realism earlier filmmakers may've considered antithetical to the genre's basic sensibility. McDonald notes how the film "confronts realities of romance and sex from its very first scene" and more generally "taps into the zeitgeist through its insistence on the pitfalls of romantic love, sexual attraction, and marriage" (74). Similarly, Grindon describes a "new sense of psycho-sexual realism" in the film, whose "elaboration of character psychology leads to the internalization of conventional obstacles and [a] plot focus[ing] on how relationships work – or fail" (150). And Frank Krutnik, in giving a further account of this romcom's unusual degree of realism, explains the film's representation of both a "breakdown of traditional romantic structures" and the "the difficulty of sustaining attachments in a [...] world in which traditional conceptions of heterosexual intimacy have lost their authority" (20). Critics tend to point to Alvy's openly pessimistic attitude towards romance and just life in general. He regards life as being "essentially [...] full of loneliness, misery, suffering and unhappiness" but that "it's all over much too quickly," his admission of despair tempered by an ironic punchline. The narrative's overall tone is largely a function of this tension between persistent dread and comic relief, an uneasy balance reflective in some ways of social turbulence in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

The popularity of Allen's film—and the group of tonally similar films arriving in its wake—actually inspired a new term, "nervous comedy," for this subcategory of the radical romcom. Whereas the larger "radical" label could describe any number of surprising stylistic or thematic shifts within the genre in the 1970s, the nervous romcom had a more distinct narrative signature, characterized by neurotic protagonists, ambivalence towards romance, and world weariness. Grindon identifies "a sophisticated realism" as the essential quality of nervous romcom, a narrative style "closer to the actual audience experience of courtship and intimacy," representing "the transformation of sexual mores in American culture" (57). Michael Ritchie's Semi-Tough (1977) is another example of this romcom type. Just as with Annie Hall, this film sidesteps the matrimonial imperative but in an even more direct way. In the climactic wedding scene, when the male protagonist, Marvin, is asked by the officiant if he will take the female protagonist, Barbara, to be his wife, he doesn't respond right away, instead hesitating and creating an awkward silence before finally saying, "I don't." Or in Mazursky's An Unmarried Woman, mentioned above, Erica refuses to commit to a relationship, in part because of a guardedness she develops after her husband of many years abruptly leaves her for someone else. In these films, there is an outward suspicion of marriage rather than the kind of blithe pursuit of romance typical of earlier romcoms. Even with a character like *The Apartment*'s Fran Kubelik, whose weariness and cynicism resemble what we find among nervous romcom protagonists, there remains a basic disposition to marry. Fran's epiphanic change of course in the film's final moments, as she realizes the sincerity of Bud's affections in contrast with Jeff's equivocations, is essentially hopeful,

even idealistic. This narrative tone or sensibility is simply different from—or considerably muted in—nervous romantic comedy, where the matrimonial imperative is often discharged. As *Annie Hall* nears its end, Alvy tells one final joke:

[This] guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, 'Doc, uh, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken.' And, uh, the doctor says, 'Well, why don't you turn him in?' And the guy says, 'I would, but I need the eggs.' Well, I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd and...but, uh, I guess we keep going through it because, uh, most of us need the eggs.

While charming, this joke is also self-mocking and cynical, eliciting a playful ambivalence towards romance at a moment in the narrative when the genre is typically most earnest and settled.

## Neo-traditional comedies

Nervous comedies, and the larger radical category containing them, persisted as a popular form of the romcom into the 1980s, but as Grindon explains, these soberer, more realism-driven films provoked a strange reaction in the genre:

The romantic comedy [during the 1970s] surrendered an innocence cultivated during the studio era that could never be restored. The skepticism about love pervading the [radical romcom] cycle threatened the humor and optimism long associated with the genre. The happy ending was dethroned as a permanent fixture and the guarantee of love triumphant was cashiered for a never-ending struggle between men and women. The limitations of the nervous romance, however, prompted a response that came in the next cycle. (58)

The films of this next cycle—clearly more of an emergent and enduring style of romcom as opposed to a timebound period in the genre—are most commonly referred to as "neotraditional romantic comedies," and as noted earlier in this chapter, arguably the most prominent feature of these films is a general romantic nostalgia, a wistful reorientation towards an earlier narrative conventionality and cultural sensibility, and in some cases,

towards an earlier moment in time. In the neo-traditional romcom, the cynicism of radical romcoms is supplanted by an abiding faith in traditional romantic practices and values, where romance itself is again treated as a means to defuse conflict and secure contentment. Implicit in this neo-traditionalism, perhaps surprisingly, is also a renewed idealization of old-fashioned gender norms. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the rise of neoconservatism in the 1980s was as much a cultural phenomenon as political, a reaction to the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly feminism. If the radical romcom represents a leftward swing of the cultural pendulum, the neo-traditional romcom likely represents its inevitable backswing. It is common, then, to find in this next iteration of the romcom representations of gender reflecting a bygone, less reformist sensibility. Representations of sex in the genre also undergo change, which Grindon and Mortimer attribute to the conservative reaction to the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s. Grindon explains that the "epidemic infected the broader culture with a reminder of the grim consequences that could arise from sexual recklessness," which in turn led to a "more conservative approach to intimate relations on screen parallel[ing] the broader social trends shaping American life" (58). Mortimer interprets this shift in sexual content similarly, noting how the crisis "added to [a] sense of uncertainty and pessimism regarding sex and relationships," but she also points to "soaring divorce rates, ever-growing numbers of single parent families and breakdown in traditional family structures" as possible reasons for this reemergence of pre-modern, prefeminist narrative sensibilities, more oriented towards old-fashioned courtship and marriage (18).

One of the more convenient examples of this return to an older romcom sensibility is Rob Reiner's When Harry Met Sally (1989). If the realism and disillusionment of Annie Hall may be read, in part, as a critique of the romcom genre, Reiner's film may be read as a narrative countermeasure, restoring some of the conventionality eschewed by radical romcoms. For instance, the film very clearly invokes a notion of romantic destiny or soulmates, the two protagonists seemingly brought together by fate, even as conflicts arise. Mortimer attributes a "new optimism about courtship" to Reiner's film, which came to characterize many romcoms from the late 1980s through the 1990s (170). From its opening credits, set to the tune of old romantic standard "It Had to Be You"—the same song Alvy watches Annie perform in Annie Hall—Reiner's film immediately establishes a lighter, more sentimental tone than, say, the opening sequence of *The Graduate*, a drawn-out series of shots of Ben arriving at an airport, stonefaced and alone, while Simon & Garfunkel's melancholic ballad deepens our sense of this character's isolation and angst. The film next introduces one of its signature narrative motifs: documentary style excerpts of older couples fondly recalling how they met and how long they've remained married. These excerpts occur throughout the film, woven into the main narrative arc in which protagonists Harry Burns and Sally Albright meet, run into each other multiple times over the next decade, eventually become friends, sleep together, separate temporarily to examine the nature of their relationship, and ultimately marry. This juxtaposition—of the long-married couples' memoirs with the protagonists' circuitous courtship—has two effects. First, it implies that Harry and Sally will ultimately become like these older couples, happily married

after many years. Secondly, it revives the old-fashioned romcom convention of treating romance as integral to a life well spent, as though the virtues of a long marriage are self-evident and beyond suspicion. The documentary style footage elicits a kind of realism, presenting the couples more as research subjects than fictional characters. Subsequently, when Harry and Sally themselves appear in the final documentary style scene, reminiscing about their own path to marriage, their personal triumph signifies a triumph for romance itself. That is, in the film's final scene, Harry and Sally have transcended their courtship narrative and now inhabit for the first time the same diegetic space given to the older married couples. This ending implies that Harry and Sally, despite being decades younger than the other couples, will share their fate, having resolved their differences and agreed to marry. In line with neo-traditional sensibility, romance is imbued here with the same teleological force and significance we see in much older romcoms like *Bringing Up Baby* and *My Man Godfrey*.

When Harry Met Sally, therefore, models some of the more distinguishing conventions of the neo-traditional romcom. In addition to its idealization of marriage, it features a meet-cute, initial antagonism between the protagonists, protagonists in relationships with the "wrong partner," a complicated courtship, and various forms of romantic nostalgia. Just as in screwball and sex comedies, the main narrative conflict in When Harry Met Sally is ironically between the two characters who eventually fall in love. In some neo-traditional comedies, though, narrative conflict is more internal, as engendered by a protagonist's neurosis or personality quirk. But unlike Alvy of Annie Hall, whose anxieties persist in his character and undermine his romantic prospects,

protagonists in these neo-traditional films will often transcend their personal shortcomings, as a consequence of romantic desire or attachment. For instance, in Brian Grazer's Splash (1984), protagonist Allen Bauer is quickly presented as fearful of commitment, which prompts his domestic partner, Victoria, to leave him. Allen's romantic apprehensions subsequently turn to pessimism: "I'm gonna grow old, and I'm gonna grow lonely, and I'm gonna die." But when he has a boating accident and is rescued by "Madison," a mermaid he first encountered as a child, Allen's sullenness begins to subside. 21 As such, Allen typifies a romcom protagonist who, as Steve Neale has explained, is "gradually or instantly 'cured' by contact with the 'harmless', 'healthy' or 'liberating' eccentricity of the other" (294). Madison's prelapsarian innocence and romantic disposition, while occasionally given humorous undertones, are mainly treated without irony. That is, her earnest desire to be with Allen is sufficient to negate his defeatist attitude and arouse romantic feeling. The neo-traditional romcom signals a reascendance of this more starry-eyed, even saccharine narrative sensibility, where love conquers all. McDonald notes that this style of romcom "stresses its return to the conventions of earlier comedies, ignoring the elements that made the radical comedy so exciting for its time" (86).

Neo-traditional romantic comedy cannot be reduced to happier endings and emotionally mature protagonists, however. The nostalgia typical of these films, for instance, is not only discernible as a return to older romcom conventions; we see it as well as a penchant for the "old-fashioned." There are modern interpretations of classic literature, as in *Roxanne* (1987) with Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and *Pretty* 

Woman (1990) with George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion. Other neo-traditional romcoms, like Romancing the Stone (1984), Crocodile Dundee (1986) and The Princess Bride (1987), draw from the tropes and iconography of medieval romance, offering narratives steeped in old world notions of valiant heroes and vulnerable heroines. Further still, nostalgia in the neo-traditional film even takes the form of time-travel fantasy in Francis Ford Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). The narrative is centered upon the title character's 25-year high school reunion, an event whose basic aspiration is deeply nostalgic, eliciting pleasure by conjuring or revisiting the past. The protagonist, Peggy Sue Kelcher-Bodell, prepares to attend the reunion without her estranged husband, Charlie Bodell, who has recently had an affair. At the reunion, after being named her class "queen," Peggy Sue faints and upon waking is somehow back in 1960, as her teenage self the year of her high school graduation, but with the full knowledge and memories accumulated over the past 25 years. That is, she is her present self psychologically but looks as she did in high school. The film's main narrative device, then, is a proffered fantasy of being given a second chance with consequential life decisions, particularly one's choice of spouse. Peggy Sue is able to bring her middleaged wisdom to bear upon the opportunities before her as a teenager, and while this second trip through a year already lived does take some different turns, her biggest decision—to marry Charlie, her high school sweetheart—remains unchanged. Along with its nostalgic fondness for Buddy Holly and poodle skirts, then, this film's most prominent neo-traditional element is a return to an earlier romcom narrative convention, where the romantic couple's final reconciliation is unambiguous. By the time Peggy Sue

returns to the present, her "visit" to 1960 actually a dream that occurred after fainting at the reunion, she has regained an affection for Charlie strained by his infidelity, thereby completing a narrative path typical of the neo-traditional comedy. That is, whereas infidelity in nervous comedies may occasion a questioning of marriage or even a more general world weariness, as with Alvy in *Annie Hall*, the neo-traditional romcom resists. Peggy Sue's initial misgivings about Charlie are ultimately overpowered by the sincerity of his apology and the charm of reliving their initial courtship. In this way, Coppola's film also serves as a contemporary example of what Stanley Cavell has termed "the comedy of remarriage," where the narrative begins with a couple in a state of discord but concludes with their having fallen back in love. <sup>22</sup>

Closely related to this proneness to romantic reconciliation in the neo-traditional romcom, there is also a narrative pattern of couples overcoming considerable, even far-fetched obstacles in order to be together. Given the seeming overdetermination of romantic reconciliations in some of these films, there is even a sense of romantic anxiety in these narratives, as though giving the film a more unsettled, ambiguous final act would provoke uneasiness. MacDonald finds in neo-traditional romcoms a "fear of the freedom offered by a more open ending," as seen in earlier radical romcoms like *Annie Hall* and, to a lesser extent, *The Graduate* (92). To illustrate, in Mark Waters' *Just Like Heaven* (2005), protagonist Elizabeth Masterson is in a near-fatal car accident in the film's first act, leaving her in a coma. After some months pass, and Elizabeth remains on life support, her sister decides to sublet Elizabeth's posh San Francisco apartment, which draws the attention of widower David Abbott. David moves into the apartment and soon,

to his shock, begins seeing and interacting with Elizabeth's spirit, which leads them both to assume that she is dead. As the initial surprise of the supernatural encounter subsides, David continues to speak with Elizabeth's spirit, and a romantic tension builds between them. As this is a romantic comedy, we expect that these two characters will ultimately get past the non-trivial problem of her being a spectral presence and his being very much alive. The point I wish to make about this film, though, is that as a neo-traditional romcom, narrative conventionality requires that David and Elizabeth surmount these barriers to their romance, which they ultimately do. David eventually learns that Elizabeth is not dead but comatose and soon to be taken off of life support, in accordance with her advance healthcare directive. However, as fate would have it, David arrives just in time to intervene, kissing a still-unconscious Elizabeth, who then magically awakens, but with no memory of ever knowing David. Just Like Heaven, moreover, not only demonstrates the neo-traditional tendency to create—and miraculously resolve formidable obstacles for its romantic protagonists; its ending also evokes a nostalgia for classic fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*.

## An inflection point

Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) evokes a different kind of nostalgia. This film—the highest grossing romcom the year of its release and the fourth highest grossing romcom of the 1990s—contains a deep nostalgia for cinematic romance itself, a kind of meta-nostalgia for its own genre's past. Whereas *When Harry Met Sally* evokes romantic nostalgia through music and *Peggy Sue Got Married* through 1960s Americana, *Sleepless in Seattle* does this by treating Leo McCarey's 1957 film, *An Affair to* 

Remember, as a source of timeless wisdom. Ephron's film is unique in this sense, adding to the neo-traditional aesthetic characters whose romantic sensibilities are actually shaped by Hollywood narratives. In one scene, for instance, where romantic heroine Annie Reed further opens up to her closest friend, Becky, about her rising infatuation with Sam Baldwin, a widower she heard on a call-in radio show, Annie is deeply affected as she watches McCarey's old-fashioned romance and begins drafting a letter to Sam:

ANNIE. Now those were the days when people knew how to be in love.

BECKY. You're a basket case.

ANNIE. (as she types) They knew it. Time, distance, nothing could separate them. Because they knew. It was right. It was real. It was...

BECKY. (interrupting)...a movie. (beat) That's your problem. You don't want to be in love. You want to be in love in a movie. (beat) Read it to me.

Annie's invocation here of an earlier time — "when people knew how to be in love"—is not at all surprising in a neo-traditional romcom. What's more distinctive here is the film's citationality, making these pointed references to another cinematic narrative. Even as Becky lightly chides her, Annie is given a quixotic attachment to a particular romance narrative, though her fanciful conviction that previous generations better understood love — that "those were the days" — implies a more general idealization of both classic Hollywood narratives and a bygone era. In a different scene, Annie visits her brother, Dennis, and inquires of his own experience with courtship. Her questions to him deepen our sense of her curious nostalgia:

ANNIE. Well, I think I'm going crazy, Dennis, I really do. (pauses) Are you happily married?

DENNIS. (surprised) What?

ANNIE. I mean, why did you get married? Was it all trumpets and fireworks and...

DENNIS. (interrupting) I got married because Betsy said we had to break up or get married. So we got married.

ANNIE. But when you first met her, did you believe that she was the only person for you, that in some mystical, cosmic way, it was fated?"

DENNIS. Annie, when you're attracted to someone, it just means that your subconscious is attracted to their subconscious...subconsciously. So what we think of as fate is just two neuroses knowing they're a perfect match.

This exchange contrasts Dennis' clear-eyed, even cynical perspective with Annie's investment in fantasy, her ideas about extravagant celebration and mystical power again seemingly drawn from romantic films. Significantly, Annie is not the only character whose reasoning and expectations are informed by cinematic narratives, as this eventually becomes a more general feature of the film. Becky, too, is deeply familiar with *An Affair to Remember*, perfectly mouthing characters' lines as she and Annie watch the film, and it is implied that her own romantic relationships have been somehow unfulfilling when she decries "men never get this movie." Further still, the film even playfully depicts a Hollywood-derived romantic sensibility in children, when Sam asks his eight-year-old son, Jonah, why he knows so much about women's behavior during sex and Jonah replies, "Jed's got cable."

Along with this portrayal of a romantic inculcation among its characters, I would suggest, more principally, that *Sleepless in Seattle* may be regarded as the apotheosis of neo-traditional romantic comedy—a high point for this iteration of the genre. In order to appreciate this film's paradigmatic status, I'll here examine its neo-traditional narrative

conventionality more closely. To begin, Ephron's film demonstrates the convention of having the protagonists face imposing obstacles in order to be together, as with Just Like Heaven. Sam lives in Seattle, Annie in Baltimore. Their geographical barrier is combined with the circumstance of there being no reasonable basis for the two characters to ever meet. By the time Sam and Annie do actually meet and engage in conversation in the film's final scene, atop the Empire State Building, on Valentine's Day—a comical amount of plot contrivances have been needed to make their climactic encounter possible. Annie, who works as a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, surreptitiously obtains private information about Sam, his deceased wife, and his son. She hires a private investigator in Seattle to conduct a background check on Sam and take photographs of him. She lies to her fiancée, Walter, about the purpose and destination of a work trip, leaving for Seattle with the intention of meeting Sam face to face. Meanwhile, Becky sends a letter Annie drafted to Sam and Jonah, inviting them to meet her in New York on Valentine's Day, which Annie only finds out about after receiving a letter from Jonah who, unbeknownst to his father, has written to accept Annie's invitation. As these turns and developments advance the narrative towards its expected conclusion, there is a repeated invocation of romantic superstition, making Sam and Annie's eventual union feel decreed by fate. In trying to convince his father of his romantic wisdom, Jonah says that he is "younger and pure [and thus] more in touch with cosmic forces." And Annie attributes great importance to having intuited that Sam would complete a sentence with the word "magic," when she first listens to him on the radio show. These highly romantic tropes,

along with the film's exaggerated improbability of Sam and Annie actually becoming a couple, are prominent traditionalist elements in *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Still, it is the multidimensional nostalgia of Ephron's film that makes it such an exemplary neo-traditionalist romcom. For in addition to treating *An Affair to Remember* as a kind of romantic archetype, the film also uses old-timey music standards to create an ambient wistfulness in the narrative. Whereas *When Harry Met Sally* uses a single romantic song to establish a desired mood, *Sleepless in Seattle* makes music more prominent, adorning the narrative with standards sung by Jimmy Durante, Louis Armstrong, and Nat King Cole. One such song, "As Time Goes By," plays over the opening credits. As a thematic complement to the narrative, this song's lyrics contain images of old-fashioned courtship and romantic sentiment:

As time goes by
And when two lovers woo
They still say 'I love you'
On that you can rely
No matter what the future brings
As time goes by
Moonlight and love songs
Never out of date
Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate
Woman needs man, and man must have his mate

In this verse, the lyrics first conjure timeless romance but then culminate by declaring heteronormative marriage to be a necessity. I call attention to these lines from the song because they foreshadow one of the film's most palpable narrative tensions. Namely, Sam's singlehood is treated as a crisis. Even though the film begins with the funeral for Maggie—Sam's wife and Jonah's mother—the impact of her death is notably

understated. This, of course, is attributable more to the exigencies of the genre than to a callousness in the filmmakers: a romcom must center courtship, regardless of dramatic circumstance. Any enduring traumatic effect from Maggie's passing can only be lightly acknowledged in the narrative, lest the darkness of the tragedy interfere with the romcom's essential brightness.

In lieu of an overly realistic, more prolonged representation of bereavement, then, the film instead quickly pivots to the emergency of Sam's singlehood. As the song goes, a "man must have his mate," an idea the film takes rather seriously. In the opening moments of the film, not long after Maggie's death, and Sam visibly still in mourning, his sister, Suzy, suddenly encourages him to think of dating again, insisting that he will "meet someone." Those closest to him immediately treat Sam's singlehood as his greatest devastation, not the loss of his spouse. The best example of this, though, is Jonah's calling into a self-help talk radio program—as "Sleepless in Seattle"—and telling the host that his dad desperately "needs a new wife." After Sam himself gets on the line and reluctantly agrees to speak with the host about losing his wife, the charming sincerity of his answers makes him an overnight sensation, drawing letters in the mail from hundreds of women interested in dating him. Jonah's call to the radio show changes his father's struggles with singlehood from being a private family concern to a public story drawing national attention. Much of what occurs thereafter is driven by the apparent crisis of Sam's singlehood, as members of his social circle—specifically his client and his business partner—proceed to intervene in Sam's personal life and plot a path to his remarriage. McDonald, in noticing this urgency in neo-traditional romcoms to foist

conjugal reconciliation upon the narrative, claims that these films reflect an "anxiety over the possibility of lasting love in contemporary society, [their] very relentlessness in having [reconciliation occur] betraying [a] lack of faith in such an outcome" (92).

This anxiety, of course, is not limited to Sam and his circle. Annie, too, exhibits romantic apprehension, hers owing more to an inability to admit she does not love her fiancé. Annie's engagement to Walter demonstrates the long-standing romcom convention of having a protagonist involved with the "wrong partner," so to speak, as we have already seen in Bringing Up Baby, The Apartment, The Graduate, and Splash. Of these earlier romcoms, Sleepless in Seattle has the most in common—in its utilization of a "wrong partner" figure"—with *The Apartment*, for in each, this character is relatively well developed and plays a prominent role in the narrative's trajectory and outcome. Walter's wrongness for Annie is hinted at almost immediately, when their engagement announcement to Annie's family is uneasy and awkward. There is then a scene where Annie's mother affectionately recounts, privately to Annie, her first "magical" encounter with Annie's father, which makes Annie and Walter's first meeting seem mundane and unromantic by comparison. Annie's looming second thoughts about her engagement thus arise from seeing her own relationship as insufficiently romantic. Even as she scoffs at her mother's invocation of romantic destiny, making Annie initially seem cynical about love, she soon betrays an even deeper, more consuming romantic sensibility. When Annie first hears Sam on the radio, as he speaks endearingly about his late wife, it begins to magnify her perceived inadequacies in her engagement. From this point onward, her narrative arc consists of an elaborate attempt to meet Sam, a confused attempt to generate

enthusiasm for her engagement, an eventual realization that she cannot marry Walter, and a climactic final scene where she and Sam formally meet for the first time. The arrival of this last scene has the effect of alleviating the film's central anxiety, rooted in Sam's singlehood and Annie's insufficiently romantic engagement. But this scene also cleverly alludes to *An Affair to Remember* one last time, by having Sam and Annie meet in the same spot chosen by the earlier film's protagonists. The film's ending, moreover, heightens romantic nostalgia and satisfies the neo-traditional penchant for unambiguous closure, however improbable.

This leaves, though, the question of this film's—and the general neo-traditional romcom's—relation to feminism. In accounting for *Sleepless in Seattle*'s considerable popularity, noting its deep traditionalism and nostalgia, I would posit a correlation between the film's success and feminism's abated influence in romcom narrative conventionality during much of the 1980s and the early 1990s. In this period, as a reaction not only to feminism but to more general progressivist activism, conservatism began to reemerge politically and culturally. Langer calls the reaction a "backlash," driven in part by popular film and television content of the period, which often depicted women "finding their identities by serving home, husband, and the world" (165). The magazine *Good Housekeeping* even launched an ad campaign in 1988 called the "New Traditionalist," whose contributors included conservative groups like Moral Majority, Heritage Foundation and fundamentalist Christian churches (Langer 165). These new "magazine moralists," as Langer refers to them, "struck feminism in its most vulnerable spot—its neglect of homemakers and their fear of how feminist-backed legislation might

affect them" (166). Some romcoms of the period—*Baby Boom* (1987), *Father of the Bride* (1991), *Nine Months* (1995)—clearly reflect the backlash sensibility Langer describes, offering representations of women oriented around traditional femininity.

Others, though, give more nuanced, diverse representations, featuring female characters in positions of professional or institutional power, such as Jane Craig in *Broadcast News* (1987), Katharine Parker in *Working Girl* (1988), Rita Hanson in *Groundhog Day* (1993), and Mary Jensen in *There's Something About Mary* (1998). In giving an account of this tension between conservative and progressive elements in the neo-traditionalist heroine, Grindon notes that

[even] if heterosexual desire promotes flirtation, courtship, and marriage, screen women [...] exercise sexual initiative and economic independence that exceeds a conservative posture. Though the reaffirmation of romance [in this iteration of the genre] brings many traditional conventions back to romantic comedy, particularly the prospect of finding a permanent, loving partner, the cycle continues to portray the social developments experienced by women since the 1960s. (60)

Neo-traditional romantic comedy, then, is an inflection point for the genre, as these films negotiate competing cultural interests, balancing a re-ascendant conservativism against a muted but resilient feminist sensibility. *Sleepless in Seattle* reflects both of these strands in the culture, drawing heavily from the genre's oldest narrative tropes and cues but also engaging with shifts in gender roles underway by the 1990s.

On balance, however, *Sleepless in Seattle* is not a feminist film. At times, its engagement with gender simply feels regressive and problematic, particularly by contemporary standards. In a scene where Suzy becomes emotional, for instance, while recounting a powerful moment in *An Affair to Remember*, her own husband, brother and nephew gaze at her with contempt. Sam then remarks, "that's a chick's movie," to which

her husband Greg responds, "I would say so." Moving from contempt to mockery, Sam and Greg then pretend to sob while recounting the end of *The Dirty Dozen*, the joke being that it takes a war film—a grittier, more masculinized genre—to draw men's tears. This moment in the film invokes an old practice—both clinical and cultural—of regarding women's displays of distress as "hysteria," a term whose feminization has a significant history. In *The History of Sexuality*, for instance, Michel Foucault calls the "hysterization of women" an instrument of medical and psychiatric power (104). And more recently, in describing gendered perceptions of nervous disorders in the early twentieth century, Elaine Showalter has written that "nervous women received much more attention than nervous men, and were labeled as 'hysterical' or 'neurasthenic' in the contexts of a highly charged rhetoric about the dangers of higher education, women's suffrage, and female self-assertion in general" (306). Invocations of "the hysterical woman," therefore, even when made in jest, entail a legacy of misogynistic practices.

I would argue further that the casual, flippant tone in this scene, where the three male characters ridicule Suzy's distress, even reflects a more ambient sexism in the film, however subtle. This sexism is most discernible in the film's derision of a social landscape changed by feminism. In a scene where Sam's friend and business partner, Jay, offers romantic advice, the two joke about the sexualization of men's bodies:

SAM. I just want to know what it's like out there.

JAY. That's what I'm trying to tell you...what women are looking for. Pecs and a cute butt.

SAM. You mean, like, 'He has the cutest butt'?

JAY. Yeah.

SAM. Where did I hear that recently?

JAY. Everywhere. You can't even turn on the news now without hearing about how some babe thought some guy's butt was cute. Who the first woman to say this was, I don't know, but somehow it caught on.

The intended irony in this exchange is a play on sexual objectification. Sam and Jay are bewildered—and lightly irritated—by the idea of treating men's physical attractiveness as a component of their romantic eligibility, the insinuation being that this treatment could be demeaning or embarrassing—or feminizing. In the following scene, Jay explains to Sam, who hasn't been single since 1978, that "things are a little different now," in terms of dating. As Jay explains, with some trepidation, precisely how things are different, it becomes clear that this brave new world of courtship before them is one impacted by feminism. He describes a romantic environment with a greater balance of power between partners, a more conscientious approach to dating intended to deepen intimacy, and a more shared financial responsibility. After listening to Jay's description, gallant Sam quips that he doesn't think he "could let a woman pay for dinner," suggesting his uneasiness with greater gender equality. This narrative sequence, moreover, comprised of jokes about sexual objectification and an elegiac report on dating in the 1990s, registers a disdain for social changes associated with feminism. In the following section, I examine a different relation between romantic comedy and feminism, explaining how the film *Enchanted* evokes feminist sentiment but not in ways that are necessarily progressive.

Enchanted: The Assimilatory Feminist Narrative

Kevin Lima's *Enchanted* (2007) is an amalgam of disparate narrative traditions, drawing from the genres of romantic comedy, fairy tale, and musical fantasy. While the close reading of the film that follows is mainly concerned with its romcom conventionality and assimilatory feminism, I do want to acknowledge the film's genre hybridity at the outset, as this quality has a thematic as well as stylistic significance. Lima's film is additionally noteworthy for its use of hand-drawn animation cels, computer-generated images (CGI) and live action content, making it the first Disney Studios film since Robert Zemeckis's Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (1988) to combine these specific elements. The unique layering of these cinematic effects, unsurprisingly, was the focal point of the film's marketing, whose promotional materials included the tagline "The Real World and the Animated World Collide" (see fig. 6). I call attention to this tagline because it not only underscores the film's unusual visual aesthetic but also captures a central tension in its narrative—between, on the one hand, a fantastical sensibility informed by chivalric romance narrative conventions and, on the other, a more grounded, practical sensibility informed by contemporary feminism. Ultimately, in ways explained below, the former sensibility overwhelms the latter in *Enchanted*, rendering it scarcely discernible by the film's deeply traditional conclusion. For this reason, I consider the film's feminism an assimilatory feminism, reflective of a more general, increasingly prominent feminist sensibility in mainstream American culture by the first

decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just as earlier generations of romantic comedy reflect coeval social movements and shifting sensibilities, here too, in more recent decades, the genre continues to react—and assimilate—to changing perceptions of romance, sex and



Fig. 6. *Enchanted*. Advertisement. 2007. *https://www.movieposterdb.com*. Web. 4 Mar. 2022.

marriage in the culture. As this chapter's main example of this phenomenon, then, *Enchanted* is a romcom with a distinctly feminist influence, but I argue its feminism is largely assimilatory, more intended to gratify mainstream cultural sensibilities than offer a critical commentary on romantic ideology. The film does this in three primary ways: through its use of parody and disillusionment, narrative disruption, and performative feminism.

Firstly, in breaking with the neo-traditional practice of treating romantic ideals with unflagging sincerity, *Enchanted* is largely a parody of those ideals. Its cynicism towards romance is clearly measured and arguably collapses beneath the weight of the

film's weightier genre-driven objectives. But I read this tonal ambivalence or tension in the film as feminism's emerging—and assimilatory—pressure on the genre, as an increasing number of romcoms in the decade of *Enchanted*'s release contain comparable narrative tensions. Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, Margaret Tate in *The Proposal*, and Andy Sachs in *The Devil Wears Prada* are all inclined towards marriage, but not as credulously as neo-traditional protagonists like Sally Albright of *When Harry Met Sally* or Annie Reed in *Sleepless in Seattle*, for whom the prospect of romantic love supersedes any other consideration. By the early 2000s, as Angela McRobbie observes of popular culture in these years, "feminism [...] intervene[s] to constrain these kinds of conventional desires" (262). Many of the new female protagonists, McRobbie adds, are

young women [...] confident enough to declare their anxieties about possible failure in regard to finding a husband [and thus] avoid any aggressive or overtly traditional men, and [...] brazenly enjoy their sexuality, without fear of the sexual double standard. In addition, they are more than capable of earning their own living, and the degree of suffering or shame they anticipate in the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual self-confidence. Being without a husband does not mean they will go without men. (262)

Giselle, the heroine of *Enchanted*, largely accords with this description, expressing a skepticism towards traditional romance even if her—not to mention the romcom genre's—deeper attachment to this ideal ultimately overrides her doubt. This, I want to suggest, is a definitive feature of an assimilatory feminist romcom: a prominent yet anodyne feminist element, wherein its criticism of romantic ideology is tempered by a final yielding to the genre's traditional conventions. These conventions are indeed present in *Enchanted*, but the film is also self-reflexive and parodic, depicting familiar romantic situations and tropes—the damsel in distress, chivalric masculinity, traditional

courtship—in playfully absurd ways. On balance, though, its feminism is unavailing, insofar as the film effectively reasserts the very forms of sexism it only mildly critiques.

In spite of this limitation or problem with its feminism, *Enchanted* nevertheless demonstrates a basic level of feminist sensibility, in line with other assimilatory romcoms of the period. The first indication of this sensibility is its subtly ironic tone, readable within the film's first act, which also happens to be its longest fully animated portion. An omniscient voice-over narration, reminiscent of those heard in the beginnings of earlier Disney films like Cinderella (1950) Sleeping Beauty (1959), and Beauty and the Beast (1991), introduces the "magical kingdom" of Andalasia, where the evil Queen Narissa lives "in fear" that her stepson, Prince Edward, will someday marry, taking away her power. We aren't told what happened to Edward's father, the king, only that Narissa is now determined to stop Edward from ever marrying. The narrator's tone is mainly earnest, though the use of timeworn fairy tale clichés—"evil queen" and "true love's kiss"—introduces a parodic element. This element soon becomes more marked as we first meet Giselle, who lives in a wooded cottage among friendly anthropomorphic animals, again reminiscent of other Disney narratives. Giselle is hard at work creating a very detailed, life-size model of her ideal lover but forgets to give the model lips, which sets up the film's first musical interlude, a song called "True Love's Kiss":

I've been dreaming of a true love's kiss
And a prince I'm hoping comes with this
That's what brings ever-aftering so happy
And that's the reason we need lips so much
For lips are the only things that touch
So to spend a life of endless bliss
Just find who you love through true love's kiss

While a light mockery of "ever after" is apparent here, it's the song's claim about lips being the "only things that touch" where a parodic tone is fully established. In a play on the largely sanitized, "family-friendly" treatments of sexuality typically found in Disney animated fare, the song mocks Giselle's sexual innocence in a more direct, even bawdy way. Also, the couplet that follows is conspicuously hyperbolic, exaggerating the power of true love's kiss to a jokingly absurd degree, even by Disney's high romantic standards. As the film's opening sequence continues, we meet Edward, whose chivalry is quickly demonstrated in capturing a gigantic troll, but he is suddenly reminded of an overriding romantic goal: "my heart longs to be joined in song." Like Giselle, Edward's character is both a derivative and mockery of long-standing romance and fairy tale narrative conventions. But as a romcom figure, Edward will come to function as the "wrong partner," in some ways analogous to Sleepless in Seattle's Walter: a foil to the heroine's eventual love interest. This first act also introduces Nathaniel, a squire to Edward but a servant—and thus primarily loyal—to Narissa. Nathaniel's character type is clearly more rooted in fairy tale narratives than in romcoms, but he is given a secondary narrative arc that contributes to the film's general parodic tone.

This opening sequence, then, has both an expositional and tonal significance. The character introductions are conventional and straightforward, but the film's gentle mockery of its own genre brings parodic overtones, hinting at a feminist narrative sensibility. Even as the narrative style is familiar and allusive, comprised of elements drawn from Disney's long tradition of animated musical fantasy, the wryness in the lyrics and dialogue is a departure from the more earnest tone of, say, the opening sequence of

Cinderella. This tone becomes most pronounced, though, as the film dramatically shifts from animation to live-action. Narissa, disguised as a crone, accosts Giselle just before she is to marry Edward. After leading her to a wishing well, Narissa shoves Giselle into the well, where she falls far out of sight. By the time Giselle's fall has ended, it is not immediately clear where she is, though she is unharmed and, most notably, no longer animated. Instead of being a two-dimensional cartoon character, Giselle is now a threedimensional human figure, played by actress Amy Adams (see fig. 7). Having somehow fallen through an interdimensional portal, Giselle has left the realm of fantasy—signified by animation, musical interludes, and talking animals—and arrived in the realm of "reality"—signified by live-action New York City. At this moment, the film's ironic tone is paired with a complex collision in the narrative, between cinematic modes, film genres, and even narrative teleologies. Giselle's recontextualization, from one narrative space to another, makes her more than a character: she becomes a symbol of Andalasia itself, of romantic narrative conventionality and its underlying ideology. In emerging, then, from beneath a city street into a bustling Times Square, she is more than a disoriented, helpless damsel; she represents an entire narrative tradition and the fantastical logics therein implied.

The moment of Giselle's arrival in New York, I want to suggest, is a point of narrative disruption. It has a function similar to a "first contact" scene in science fiction, but instead of depicting an encounter between humans and aliens, this scene stages a clash between competing, seemingly irreconcilable narrative modes.<sup>23</sup> Giselle's romantic narrative is superimposed upon a narrative space that, at least initially, is ordered by



Fig. 7. Enchanted. Advertisement. 2007. https://www.movieposterdb.com. Web. 7 Mar. 2022.

realism. Naturally, this narrative technique engenders irony: Giselle immediately looks for anyone or anything familiar—Edward, his castle, other Andalasians—but instead finds herself in an overcrowded, impersonal, and even dangerous place. New York and its inhabitants have an Otherness, as Giselle does not act or reason as they do, and a schism begins to emerge between Giselle, as an emblem of narrative romance, and New York, as an emblem of narrative realism. I read this feature of the narrative as a literary form of epistemological rupture, which is a moment when new knowledge—typically scientific—engenders crisis, complication, or dissonance for an older, conventional set of beliefs. Amary Tiles explains further that "[a]fter the rupture the non-scientific past comes to be seen as [...] superstition" and that this moment "entails not simply the addition of new knowledge, but the reorganization of the very possibility of knowledge," altering the "conditions of what is and can be known" (12). This, I am positing, is the

situation Giselle finds herself in as an Andalasian in New York. She represents one narrative epistemology, and New York another. Giselle's disorientation occurs, then, because her mode of reasoning fails her. One example of this is a scene where, after asking strangers she passes on the street for directions to the "castle" and having her tiara stolen from her by a vagrant, Giselle chances upon a glittering billboard advertisement for "The Palace Casino," described as a place where "dreams come true" (see fig. 8). In spite of the billboard being two-dimensional and an obvious façade, Giselle believes this to be an *actual* castle and proceeds to climb up to a landing in front of the billboard, knock on the fake door, and beg to be let inside. It's a comical scene, meant to deepen our sense of Giselle's displacement. But it also demonstrates her inability to read and comprehend this new setting. She believes the billboard is a real castle, until her eventual love interest, Robert Phillip, happens to pass in a taxi with his young daughter, Morgan. Giselle's dissonance, moreover, arises from a literary form of epistemological rupture, where there is a disconnection between the presumed knowledge attributed to a character



Fig. 8. Enchanted.

and the presumed knowledge required for that character to negotiate an unfamiliar space.

On a different interpretive level, this rupture is also an effect of genre collision. The film's initial blend of musical fantasy and fairy tale is interrupted by the narrative's sudden change of setting, dimension, and cinematic mode. In relocating from Andalasia to New York, the narrative moves from a realm of fantasy to a realm of everyday human experience and struggle. I would suggest, though, that these realms function as more than settings; in this particular narrative, they serve as indices of genre. Andalasia's animated realm signifies a supernatural folkloric mode, where animals speak, trolls roam the forest, and a "life of endless bliss" is only ever a kiss away. New York's live action realm signifies a realistic mode, where narrative phenomena are restricted by the same principles and laws that structure human reality. Since these distinct narrative modes entail accordingly distinct narrative logics, our narrative footing, so to speak, is momentarily unsettled. For as Giselle begins to move through her new environment, we cannot immediately discern an operant narrative logic. The film accentuates this indeterminacy by having Giselle appear exactly as she did in Andalasia: dressed in a cartoonishly bouffant gown, wearing ornate jewelry, with her hair styled for a royal wedding. Are her Andalasian accoutrements all that Giselle has brought with her to this different narrative realm, or are we to infer that some degree or form of Andalasian narrative logic has accompanied her? The film soon makes clear that it is the latter: even as the narrative shifts from Andalasia to New York, some of the supernatural elements depicted in the film's animated opening act—animals that understand and respond to

human language, Giselle's use of song to influence and control her environment, and Narissa's physical shapeshifting—are indeed possible in the film's live action realm.

In this way, the film creates a narrative space unbound, at least momentarily, by what narrative theorist David Herman calls "story logic," which he defines as "a logic consisting of design principles that [...] operate at relatively local as well as relatively global levels of narrative structure" (130). I would underscore here the relation Herman posits between story logic and design principles, as these latter are often a function or attribute of narrative genre. Insofar as a narrative's genre is intuitable, provided certain design markers or codes are present, an audience is prompted to apply a particular narrative logic. In *Enchanted*, our initial prompt is the oft-used convention at the start of many Disney animated fantasy films, showing a soon-to-be-opened storybook (see figs. 9 and 10) emblazoned with the film's title. Film theory refers to this as a syntagma, a "unit of narrative [...] according to which individual shots can be grouped"; an analysis of a film's syntagmatic content, therefore, allows us to "determine how images come together in a pattern which forms the overall narrative logic of the film-text" (Stam et al. 40).



Fig. 9. Enchanted.



Fig. 10. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

The placement of this particular syntagma—a genre-specific narrative unit—is an incitement to let our reading and expectations of the film be informed by previous encounters with this genre. As with other animated fantasy films, the operant narrative logic here will *not* be structured by realism. *Enchanted* invokes a logic predicated on a fundamentally *unrealistic* narrative mode, where what happens (*fabula*) and how things happen (*sjuzet*) may fail to accord with conventional reason or with realistic genericity. This, then, is why the film's *shift* in narrative mode is so significant: it confounds narrative syntax and logic, imposing a brief disjunction between narrative phenomena and interpretive reasoning.

The film even playfully *leverages* this confoundment rather than hastening to resolve it. For instance, when Robert arrives to find Giselle high above ground on the billboard landing, knocking on the image of a castle door, she loses her balance and falls, recalling an earlier scene in Andalasia where she slips and falls from a tree branch. In Andalasia, Edward arrives in the nick of time and easily catches her, as we might expect

in an animated romantic fantasy. In New York, Robert also arrives in the nick of time, and given the earlier fall scene, we could reasonably expect this moment to be its live action counterpart, where her eventual love interest demonstrates princely valor. But this narrative expectation goes awry, as Robert can only break Giselle's fall, injuring himself in the process. The implicit correspondence—between the first scene in Andalasia and the later scene in New York—is treated ironically rather than as a cue to sustain the narrative logic installed in the film's opening act. Irony, in this way, impacts the film's narrative logic by unsettling a causative process whereby intelligible connections are formed between narrative units. In describing this process further, Philip J. M. Sturgess explains that

[in] any narrative each narrative segment, however that might be defined, will cause the narrative to advance by virtue of a causative process that may or may not correspond to causative or plotting activity within the story itself. Where there is an absence of such activity, the lack of correspondence will of course be clear enough. (766)

Enchanted creates a scenario where this lack of correspondence is indeed clear: Robert's inability to mimic Edward's heroic act implies that the film's causative or plotting activity may not follow the same narrative logic presented in Andalasia.

Moreover, as the film progresses, these various forms of narrative disruption—epistemological rupture, genre indeterminacy, logical confoundment—take on an increasingly critical function. That is, the film's discordant pairing of animated fantasy with live action realism becomes more legibly ironic, meant to parody the narrative traditions it draws from. In looking at further scenes from the film, we also notice that the parody has a distinctly feminist tone. For instance, as Giselle accompanies Robert

and Morgan to their apartment, her billowy wedding gown becomes a sight gag, its excessive material continuously getting caught in doorways. The gown symbolizes both Andalasia and romantic fantasy more generally. It neither literally nor figuratively fits in this new space, the gown's cartoonish size obstructing Giselle's movement and creating ironic contrast against the New York backdrop. When Robert asks her, "What is it with this dress of yours?", his bemusement has a hint of ridicule, as if he cannot help but acknowledge the absurdity of her appearance and behavior. Some of the ridicule in this moment is directed at the very aesthetic of romantic fantasy, which often includes regal, showy costumery. But since a traditional wedding gown may also represent patriarchal marriage and social hierarchy, I would suggest that the parodic treatment of Giselle's attire has feminist undertones.

These undertones become less subtle in the narrative as Giselle settles into her new surroundings. Her behaviors and assumptions remain informed by an Andalasian narrative epistemology, which—in line with romcom convention—treats romance as a kind of unfailing panacea. The film often parodies these behaviors and assumptions by having Robert react with incredulity. In one scene, for example, Giselle is very pleased to show Robert the new dress she has made for herself, out of fabric cut from his window curtains. She seems to presume that this demonstration of skill—incidentally a form of historically feminized labor—will charm him, as it might an Andalasian.<sup>25</sup> But Robert is surprised and angry, less because of the ruined curtains than for how a strange woman's presence in his apartment has upset Nancy, his girlfriend of five years. His unpleasant

reaction is utterly perplexing to Giselle, and it is implied that she has never actually experienced anger:

ROBERT. (surprised) You made a dress out of my curtains?!

GISELLE. Oh, you are unhappy. I am so sorry.

ROBERT. I'm not unhappy. I'm angry.

GISELLE. Angry?

ROBERT. (sarcastically) Yes, it's an unpleasant emotion. Have you ever heard of it?

GISELLE. I have heard of it, but I...

ROBERT. (interrupting) You have created a completely unnecessary problem with Nancy that I now have to resolve.

I would underscore in this exchange what it suggests about Giselle's knowledge or understanding of human emotion. In innocently admitting she has only *heard* of anger, not experienced it, she implies that this emotion is somehow repressed or inaccessible. Later in the film, though, this changes, as Giselle's frustrations over Robert's cynicism intensify, and she is provoked in an unfamiliar way. She tells Robert that he "make[s] [her] so...so...angry," straining to articulate this emotion but then beginning to laugh, as though declaring her newfound anger is cathartic. Giselle sounds relieved and even jubilant to express this emotion.

While it is reasonable to interpret this expansion of her emotional range as a consequence of leaving Andalasia, where anger may or may not exist, I would suggest instead that this moment represents Giselle's self-extrication from an implicit regime of gendered comportment. If we read Giselle's inexperience with anger alongside Edward's

many expressions of fury and hostility, two things become clear: first, anger exists in Andalasia, and secondly, it is a principally masculinized behavior. Edward attacks trolls and threatens others with his sword, as he violently pursues Giselle. It is not the case, then, that Andalasians have an incapacity for anger. It is, rather, that only some feel free to express and name this emotion. Narissa complicates this slightly; like Edward, she exhibits aggression and violence. But she is also a monster, in every sense of the word, possessing the power to shapeshift into a dragon or hag. In other words, Narissa's character is expected to behave cruelly, quite the opposite of Giselle, who is alluring and caring and graceful—feminized traits. Giselle comports herself with a pleasantness that her anger towards Robert complicates, as though feminine anger is transgressive or unbecoming. When she expresses her anger, though, there is a brief tonal shift in the narrative, from ironic to earnest. As Giselle demonstrates an emotional maturity seemingly stunted in Andalasia, this change in her character is treated without ridicule or wryness. This, I would suggest, is the film's way of both accentuating Giselle's growth and critiquing gendered emotional regulation, where the expression of some emotions is considered unfeminine.

Having looked at examples of where and how the film's use of parody and narrative disruption are expressive of feminist critique, I want to turn now to examine a different form of feminism contained in *Enchanted*. In saying that the film contains a "performative" feminism, I am suggesting that it often signals an affiliation or alliance with feminism but in ways that feel insubstantial or gratuitous. To better appreciate this dimension of the film, we need to first look at specific scenes or elements with feminist

overtones. One example, which recalls *Sleepless in Seattle*, is a scene where Robert expresses confidence in his engagement because, unlike his soon-to-be-divorced clients, who "got married on a crazy romantic whim," he and Nancy are "rational" and "have taken the time to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses." In essence, Robert has abided by modern courtship practices, the kind mocked by Sam and Jay in Sleepless in Seattle. In having Robert express not only awareness but appreciation of a less whimsical, more progressive approach to dating and marriage, the film aligns this character with contemporary romantic standards, influenced by feminism. Robert, at least initially, is not imbued with the kind of old-fashioned romantic sensibility we find among male protagonists in neo-traditional romantic comedy. Another example occurs when, instead of buying Morgan "the fairy tale book [she] wanted," Robert gets his daughter a book about "remarkable" women throughout history, like Rosa Parks and Marie Curie. Perhaps because Morgan's mother is no longer in their lives, Robert wants to present positive female figures to his daughter, which again reflects some measure of feminist sensibility in his character. Robert also seeks Morgan's approval of his decision to propose to Nancy, who he says is a lot like the remarkable women in her new book. This deepens the sense that Robert has a conscientious, sensitive attitude towards marriage, as he is respectful of how marrying Nancy will impact his daughter.

The film's feminist overtones are perhaps most prominent, though, in Giselle's gradual recognition of problems with Andalasian romance, comprised of an admixture of courtly love, normative gender, and romantic teleology. The film's title, in a sense, signifies Giselle's ideological bearings as the narrative begins; her enchanted

preoccupation with finding her "one true love" seems to structure her worldview and guide her behaviors. Her character arc, though, is structured as a series of conversations and experiences—mostly by Robert's side—that leave her increasingly *disenchanted*. Just as Giselle comes to function as more than a character in this narrative, representing a particular narrative mode and ideology, Robert as well has a more dynamic function, at times bringing a tonal contrast to Giselle's excessively romantic outlook and at other times representing a realist narrative mode. For instance, Robert is a divorce attorney, which explains his rather deliberate—and indeed, realistic—approach to marriage. While his profession necessitates being in close contact with failed marriages, Giselle is unaware of this romantic circumstance, either because marital discord doesn't exist in Andalasia or because she has yet to encounter it. In a scene at Robert's office, Giselle learns that his clients are separating, which she finds both perplexing and distressing. The longer she spends with Robert, the more contact she has with his unfanciful, pragmatic view of romance. In another scene, after Giselle shares that she and Edward have only known each other one day yet plan to marry, Robert is incredulous and proceeds to explain, by way of caution, his own understanding of courtship: "Most normal people get to know each other before they get married. They date." Giselle, of course, has never heard of "dating," either since it implies an element of romantic doubt or because it entails a courtship longer than a single day, both presumably inconceivable in Andalasia. At this moment, Giselle's disenchantment is not yet apparent, as she says to Robert, "you have such strange ideas about love." Her own romantic ideas, of course, begin to influence—and will ultimately overwhelm—Robert's cynicism. Giselle even

serenades him in Central Park, accompanied by an enormous crowd of onlookers, in a scene that combines the magical element of musical fantasy with a conventional date montage from romantic comedy. The tension between these two narrative modes corresponds to the oppositional character arcs of the protagonists, Giselle's increasing disenchantment and Robert's kindled romantic feeling.

The film's ultimate resolution of this tension is to have Giselle's enduring, yet refined romantic sensibility prevail upon Robert. But before examining the film's ending, there are some further notable ways the film signals feminist affiliation. While they are out at dinner, Robert tells Giselle that he doesn't buy fairy tale books for Morgan, out of a concern that they engender unrealistic ideas about romance and family. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as Robert being overbearing, even prudish. But on the other hand, and within the film's larger discursive context, his behavior here signifies a scrupulous regard for the ideas and images Morgan is exposed to. Rather than being passive or disengaged, Robert effectively curates his daughter's reading materials, in ways that reflect a feminist sentiment. As the narrative progresses, there are two other moments demonstrating this sentiment. First, when Edward sings to Giselle, after finally tracking her down at Robert's apartment, she doesn't sing back to him, as she does in Andalasia. This is the first time in the film she is guided by something other than romantic impulse. I would suggest as well that Edward's singing to Giselle functions as a type of "hailing," in the sense Marxist theorist Louis Althusser describes in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In his essay, Althusser famously argues that "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects," a foundational

point for his model of subjectivation (115). The idea, essentially, is that one measure of subjectivation is an individual's responsiveness at being hailed by ideology, in whichever form it presents itself. Since the lyrics of Edward's song – "True Love's Kiss" – express a particular set of romantic ideals and beliefs, they take on an ideological function within the narrative. When Giselle hears the lyrics, she is not only called to join Edward in duet; she is asked to respond, and therefore accede, to the song's underlying ideological elements, which include heteronormative marriage, gendered positionalities, and romantic determinism. Her refusal of this call, then, is a symbolic repudiation of these elements, again evoking feminist sentiment. The film's strongest evocation of this sentiment, though, occurs in a climactic encounter between Narissa and the film's romantic protagonists. Having transformed into a gigantic dragon, Narissa captures Robert and ascends to a skyscraper spire, threatening to kill him. Then, in an instance of gendered role reversal, Giselle quickly responds to Robert's danger by taking Edward's sword, climbing to the spire, and heroically rescuing Robert from falling to his death. Narissa—who breaks the fourth wall in this scene—even comments on the gender play: "Oh, my! This is a twist in our story! It's the brave little princess coming to the rescue." She then turns to Robert and says, "I guess that makes you the damsel in distress, huh handsome." Here, Giselle is the plucky, sword-wielding hero, and Robert the imperiled captive. The scene depicts female heroism and male vulnerability, but it does so within a traditional romantic context, which entails normative conceptions of gender. Any feminist sensibility reflected in this scene, then, is notably undermined by a deeper commitment to these traditionalist ideals.

And ultimately, it is this commitment that makes the film's feminism more performative than substantive or interventionist, these latter two qualities being features of the critical feminist romcom discussed in the next, final section. Performative feminism is effectively a form of commodification, in the Marxist sense, where ideas, perspectives, or even entire social movements may be coopted for exploitative purposes. Feminist theorist bell hooks addresses this topic in her book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), writing that within capitalist and patriarchal cultures, "we have already witnessed the commodification of feminist thinking (just as we experience the commodification of blackness) in ways that make it seem as though one can partake of the 'good' that these movements produce without any commitment to transformative politics and practice" (71). Building on hooks' assertion, sociologist Mardiya Siba Yahaya writes that increasingly feminism has even "[become] the new 'cool' [...] where 'women's rights' [is now] the politically correct stance to take, [...] turning into a capitalist scheme." Both hooks' and Yahaya's insights align with one of this chapter's central claims: that the romantic comedy genre has, by the early 21st century, increasingly absorbed and narrativized feminist ideas, but not always in ways born of the "commitment" hooks describes. That is, a romcom like *Enchanted* may contain narrative elements progressive dialogue, parodic tones, gender reversals—that evoke feminist sentiment, but these elements begin to feel disingenuous or performative when the film's ending abandons this sentiment in order to preserve romantic ideology. The feminist element in Enchanted is merely performative because the narrative concludes by deploying arguably the genre's most conventional romantic ending, having Giselle and Robert—not to

mention Edward and Nancy, who end up falling in love and marrying in Andalasia—live happily ever after.

Rather than extend its ironic tone into a more thoroughgoing or provocative critique of the narrative traditions it draws from, *Enchanted* settles for being an assimilatory feminist narrative, unwilling to refuse or reconfigure romantic convention. Like many romcoms of recent years, this film treats feminist sensibility as more of a narrative fashion than a critical orientation. Even as it employs a clever, at times incisive parodic mode, ridiculing romantic narrative conventions, the film's final resignation to these conventions undercuts its parody. As Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse have said of the film, the film's critical aspirations

dissipate soon after Giselle finds herself in New York City, [becoming] a pretext for retelling the familiar narrative: a beautiful (motherless) maiden seeks her true love; she encounters trials and tribulations; a handsome young man appears; and they marry and live happily ever after. *Enchanted* discards its metacommentary and is absorbed into the story line it supposedly parodies, using iconic, self-referential humor and imagery to reinforce Disney products and values. (143)

I would add that this pretext even functions as a kind of narrative Trojan horse, offering only an illusory—and performative—feminist sensibility that could obstruct a more substantive critical engagement with romantic ideology. In applying this insight to the film, I would note how *Enchanted* initially mocks Giselle's romantic optimism, making her Andalasian worldview seem narrow-minded or otherwise problematic. But ultimately, the film reasserts and aestheticizes this worldview, effectively foreclosing further critical reflection on the genre as well as other possibilities for the film's characters. This, finally, is the distinguishing feature of an assimilatory feminist narrative: the film's engagement with feminism is exploitative or ornamental, signaling

progressive attitudes towards gender and romance but mainly in ways that assimilate to popular—and thus marketable—cultural attitudes. Also, as a form of romcom, the assimilatory feminist narrative tends to sustain the genre's conventionality, rather than revise or reject it. The critical feminist romcom, as this chapter's final section will show, does something different, pairing feminist critique with a more radical treatment of narrative conventionality. My discussion of *Eternal Sunshine* is meant to demonstrate how the film not only critiques romcom conventionality but creates a feminist intervention in the genre.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: The Critical Feminist Narrative

In calling Michael Gondry's Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind a critical feminist romcom, I am suggesting that the film's postmodern aesthetic, cynical tone and narrative structure have a distinctly feminist quality. Whereas an assimilatory feminist romcom typically signals feminist sensibility while mostly sustaining the genre's conventionality, a critical feminist romcom typically scrutinizes and reconfigures this conventionality. The latter type of romcom is less interested in gratifying mainstream—or dominant ideological—sensibilities than in critiquing the genre's underlying assumptions and implicit values, as I claim of Eternal Sunshine. In following Philip Green's work on feminist resistance and opposition in mainstream culture, my discussion of Gondry's film is intended to reveal its active interrogation and complication of romcom narrative form. Green writes that a "full-scale" feminist critique of narrative discourse is indeed possible "through repudiation of the culture's conventional aesthetic forms" (125). While Eternal Sunshine's ending is indeed conventional, the film more

generally deconstructs conventional romcom narrative form, taking up what Green calls a counterideological position with respect to "myths of unity" in popular cinema (125). I read the film's disorienting aesthetic and cynical tone as feminist interventions in romantic comedy, mainly for two reasons. First, its disruptive narrative effects are an implicit critique of romcom conventionality, hinting at an incoherence in romantic ideology; and secondly, its representation of male sexism and ineptitude—in romantic contexts—demonstrates the problematic relation between normative gender and courtship. In order to show these dimensions of the film, I will begin by discussing the film's relation to romcom conventionality and tradition, giving closest attention to the proto-romantic poem that gives it its title, Alexander Pope's "Eloise to Abelard"; I will then end by discussing the film's critical function, explaining both how its feminism differs from an assimilatory romcom and how it reimagines and reconfigures romcom conventionality.

Because the story told in Gondry's film is relatively bizarre, informed equally by science fiction and romcom sensibilities, it will be helpful to begin with a brief plot summary. The film is set in and around New York City and opens with Joel Barish waking to begin his day, which also happens to be Valentine's Day. Joel decides to ditch work that day, takes a train to Montauk, and happens to run into Clementine Kruczynski. At this point, we believe they are strangers, but in fact, he has already met, been in love with, and erased all memories of her. This is possible because of a non-surgical brain treatment, offered by an outpatient clinic playfully called Lacuna Incorporated, which allows for the "focused erasure of troubling memories." Joel has chosen to undergo this

treatment after discovering, from his friends Rob and Carrie, that Clementine has *already* had it. Ironically, then, they each receive the treatment, only to surprisingly meet again afterward, during the scene in Montauk in the film's opening act. It seems that, in spite of the "spotless mind" promised by Lacuna's procedure, neither character is left in a state of eternal sunshine. Instead, Joel and Clementine are somehow brought together a second time, either by fate or because the treatment did not fully eradicate their memories of each other. Once they discover what has actually taken place, the film concludes, in a conventional romcom manner, by having them decide to reunite, wiser and more tenderly than before.

In terms of its relationship to romcom genre and history, Gondry's film bears some resemblance to the radical romcoms of the 1960s and 1970s. Like *Annie Hall*, for instance, this film expresses a cynicism towards courtship, romantic love and normative gender. Unlike *Annie Hall*, though, it pairs this romantic cynicism with postmodern narrative techniques, like temporal distortion, perspectival ambiguity, intertextuality, and fragmentation. These techniques bring an ambient instability to the narrative, creating interpretive challenges. Stephen L. White has explained how the film's unusual aesthetic has a thematic purpose, creating a space to examine the complex interplay between perception, meaning and the past: "[*Eternal Sunshine*] reminds us that we are given a world saturated with meaning and with the past. And [it does this] through [its] presentation of a world that increasingly resembles the homogeneous geometrical spaces of an empty stage" (108). White refers here to the film's evanescent images of Joel's memories being deleted, which bears visual resemblance to a stage without actors or

backdrops. One of the film's most remarked upon elements, this narrative technique—editing the memory deletion sequences in ways that capture Joel's psychic interior, under siege by Lacuna technicians—has a disorienting effect, blurring boundaries between past and present, and between psychic and physical space. Sharp images are juxtaposed with unfocused ones, the latter representing Joel's weakening grip on his memories of Clementine (see fig. 11). Gondry uses this strange, at times surrealist narrative style, I would suggest, to create a uniquely intimate encounter with a character's psychology. By presenting this story largely from Joel's unconscious, unstable, and mediated perspective, the film brings a postmodern sensibility to bear upon romantic comedy.

However unusual its narrative aesthetic, *Eternal Sunshine* nevertheless employs long-standing romcom conventions, such as the meet-cute, concealment of an explosive secret, screwball protagonists, and romantic reconciliation. Christopher Grau, author of several essays on the film, has described Joel and Clementine as a "couple who end[s] up



Fig. 11. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.

getting that inspiring (if improbable) chance to 'do it all again,'" recalling the neotraditional romcom *Peggy Sue Got Married* (4). In this way, *Eternal Sunshine* is another example of what Cavell calls the "comedy of remarriage" narrative, where a couple's initial state of discord ultimately dissolves into reconciliation and reaffirmation. <sup>26</sup> After learning the truth about their past, Joel and Clementine are given over to a romantic, weary resignation:

CLEMENTINE. I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked-up girl who is looking for my own peace of mind. I'm not perfect.

JOEL. I can't think of anything I don't like about you right now.

CLEMENTINE. But you will. You will think of things. And I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me.

JOEL. Okay.

CLEMENTINE. Okay.

This final exchange is conventional in that the mere promise of romance is sufficient to alleviate their misgivings. And as this chapter has shown, romcoms often treat romantic reconciliation as the cure-all for any form of narrative conflict, even one as devastating as Joel and Clementine's near-simultaneous discovery that they both chose to delete any memory of ever having known each other.

The ending of *Eternal Sunshine*, then, has a distinctly romantic character since it implies that Joel and Clementine, nearly strangers to each other at this point, remain willing to restart their relationship, even knowing that their earlier relationship was unsatisfying. But the film's relation to Pope's 1717 poem, a forerunner of English Romanticism's emergence later that century, may be the film's most romantic element,

given how it connects the film to a much older romantic tradition in literature. Formally, "Eloisa to Abelard" is a verse epistle though in parts resembles a soliloquy. The poem was inspired by a scandalous romance, and eventual marriage, between two actual persons: Héloïse d'Argenteuil (1100-1164), a French abbess and philosopher, and Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a French philosopher and poet.<sup>27</sup> Héloïse and Peter's story, as James Burge explains in his biography of the two lovers, "is probably the most memorable tale of all from the Middle Ages [...] a mixture of spiritual quest, erotic passion, and horrific brutality" (1). This memorability of the story was sufficient to inspire countless painters' renderings historically, such as Edmund Leighton's well known 1882 oil painting "Abelard and His Pupil Heloise" (see fig. 12), which depicts Abelard consoling a plaintive Heloise.

Pope's poem, however, is more a mixture of longing and resignation, with Eloisa as the speaker, addressing her lover in epistolary form. We learn that Abelard has written to her—"Soon as thy letters trembling I unclose" (line 29)—imparting his misfortunes, and the poem is largely structured as Eloisa's loving response to him. The poem conveys Eloisa's ambivalence, compelled equally by her passion for Abelard and her devotion to God. In this stanza, for instance, Eloisa wills herself to leave her lover's name unspoken, yet still wrestles with an impulse to see it written:

Dear fatal name! rest ever unreveal'd,
Nor pass these lips in holy silence seal'd.
Hide it, my heart, within that close disguise,
Where mix'd with God's, his lov'd idea lies:
O write it not, my hand—the name appears
Already written—wash it out, my tears!
In vain lost Eloisa weeps and prays,
Her heart still dictates, and her hand obeys. (lines 9-16)

This tension between religious devotion and romantic desire is prominent in the poem. Eloisa resolves to stow away Abelard's name—and her memory of him—within her heart, "seal'd" and "unreveal'd." This is a first point of connection to *Eternal Sunshine*, as Eloisa's determination to bury—or dissociate from—the memory of her beloved resembles Clementine's, and later Joel's. The poem also uses a motif of romantic



Fig. 12. "Abelard and His Pupil Heloise." Edmund Leighton (1852-1922). melancholy, figured as Eloisa's enduring, distressing attachment to lost love. She bemoans her inability to extinguish her desire for Abelard, asking, "Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?" (line 6). This rhetorical question introduces remembered/forgotten passion as another poetic motif. Later in the poem, she extends

the motif, positing a relationship between serenity and forgetting, among the brokenhearted:

For hearts so touch'd, so pierc'd, so lost as mine. Ere such a soul regains its peaceful state, How often must it love, how often hate! How often hope, despair, resent, regret, Conceal, disdain—do all things but forget. (lines 196-200)

She implies that forgetting is the last—or hardest attained—phase of a forlorn lover's restoration, while these other emotional phases arrive more readily. This phenomenon, I would note, is present as well between Joel and Clementine, who never fully forget each other, even after receiving Lacuna's treatment. The "peaceful state" described by Pope—and promised by Lacuna—remains inaccessible, yet Eloisa nevertheless yearns for it, imagining she can somehow reinhabit a state of edenic innocence. Joel and Clementine's yearnings are more modest, interested mainly in sparing themselves the grief of romantic failure.

In turning to the poetic stanza that gives the film its title, Eloisa here romanticizes moral purity, treating it as a transcendent virtue:

How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd; (lines 207-210)

For Eloisa, a "spotless mind" is one unstained by sin and unburdened by its memory. Even as she earlier admits of a desire for Abelard's love that momentarily exceeds one for God's—"if I lose thy love, I lose my all" (line 118)—here she revises this, making it seem that only God's love can engender an "eternal sunshine." That is, in declaring the great happiness of the morally pure soul—"the blameless vestal"—Eloisa implies that her

own happiness is tempered by the blame from her illicit romance, which entails a loss of her purity. Her hyperbolic notion of an "eternal sunshine" suggests that she now fetishizes chastity, treating it as an essential but irretrievable virtue, and also a precondition for greater joy. Happiness, for Eloisa, follows vestal innocence, which she can never regain.

Happiness, for Joel and Clementine, however, follows a different innocence. The "spotless" condition they desire is an earlier state of consciousness, a moment in their psychological history prior to having met each other. Unlike Eloisa, who longs for a condition of mind unburdened by moral inadequacy, Joel and Clementine long for one unburdened by romantic failure. There are indeed moments in Pope's poem where Eloisa's romantic distress is rendered with a greater intensity than her moral distress, such as when her misery is plainly attributed to her yearning for Abelard: "That wellknown name awakens all my woes/Oh name for ever sad! for ever dear!/ Still breath'd in sighs, still usher'd with a tear" (lines 30-32). But the "eternal sunshine" unavailable to her is engendered by God's grace, not Abelard's love, which she is willing to forgo so only God may claim her devotion: "oh teach me nature to subdue,/Renounce my love, my life, myself--and you/Fill my fond heart with God alone, for he/Alone can rival, can succeed to thee" (lines 203-206). Still, even in this reaffirmation of her faith, Eloisa concedes a difficulty to "subdue" and "renounce" her desire for Abelard. Romantic frustration is figured as an impediment to peace and contentment, which is also a central motif of Gondry's film. Specifically, Joel and Clementine's decision to undergo memory erasure is effectively an acknowledgment of their inability or unwillingness to bear the

trauma of their breakup. Like Eloisa, they fetishize a prior existential condition – an "eternal sunshine of the spotless mind" – which is the name the film gives, following Pope, to its strange melancholic fantasy.

Moreover, in taking inspiration from this older text—a proto-Romantic poem in the sense that it precedes the height of British Romanticism (1789-1819) by nearly a century—Eternal Sunshine draws further from romcom conventionality. Pope's poem may not contain the same degree or form of romantic sensibility as Shakespeare's comedies, but its evocation of thwarted passion and romantic ambivalence is a point of affinity with some of the romcom narratives examined in this chapter, such as *The* Graduate and When Harry Met Sally. I would suggest, though, that the main point of affinity between Pope's poem and Gondry's film is this melancholic fantasy, whereby painful loss or disappointment is wished undone. Tonally, this is a less sanguine romantic element, more in line with the "dark" Romantic poetry of Byron, Coleridge, and Shelley.<sup>28</sup> It is also less common among romantic comedies, with an exception being the radical romcoms discussed in Section I of this chapter. There is a tension, then, between this darker romantic tradition the film draws from and the lighter tone that typifies the romcom genre. This tension in *Eternal Sunshine*'s narrative is, paradoxically, a melancholic brightness, a layering of despair with hope. But whereas hope in "Eloisa to Abelard" is generally futile, devoid of any real power to restore Eloisa's innocence, hope in Gondry's film is given a path to contentment, albeit a dubious one. In this way, the film treats "eternal sunshine"—a state of unblemished psychic peace—more realistically than Pope's poem, imagining a techno-mediated wish fulfillment for Clementine and

Joel. *Eternal Sunshine* uses this science fiction-inflected narrative device to circumvent romantic distress, envisioning an end to the "tumult" (line 4) Pope attributes to Eloisa.

Despite its darker roots and fantastical elements, however, this film is still plainly distinguishable as a romantic comedy, as briefly noted above. One of its more prominent romcom conventions is the meet-cute that occurs in the film's first act. This isn't *actually* a meet-cute, since Joel and Clementine have previously met, but in terms of romcom conventionality, this first sequence in the film *functions* as a meet-cute since we are yet to learn the truth of their past. The sequence begins as Joel skips work, and over the course of that morning, he and Clementine see each other multiple times in Montauk: on the beach, in a restaurant, and on a train platform. But they don't speak to each other until seated a few rows apart on a mainly empty train (see figs. 13 and 14). As with typical meet-cute scenes, this one hints at the later revelation of their previous relationship:

CLEMENTINE. Do I know you?

JOEL. I don't think so.

CLEMENTINE. Hmmmm. Do you ever shop at Barnes and Noble?

JOEL. Sure.

CLEMENTINE. That's it. That's me: book slave there for, like, five years now. I thought I'd seen you somewhere.

JOEL. Really? Because –

CLEMENTINE. Jesus, is it five years? I gotta quit right now.

JOEL. -- I go there all the time. I think I'd remember you.

Here, Clementine's sense of already having met Joel feels trivial, perhaps just part of her attempt to begin a conversation with him. But the meet-cute convention is rarely trivial, as Mortimer explains: "The [convention] is prophetic in that it can often suggest the nature of the couple's relationship, [...] bring[ing] together the two central characters [and] their conflicting personalities into comic collision, initiating the narrative



Fig. 13. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.

dynamic" (6). This scene is both prophetic and ironic, as the two characters comment on the likelihood of remembering each other. It also establishes a romantic tension, as Clementine initiates a flirtation, which seems to flatter and allure Joel.



Fig. 14. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.

In addition to this meet-cute sequence, the film also uses character and character dynamics in ways consistent with romcom conventionality. Joel and Clementine's characterizations recall screwball comedy protagonists. Like Susan from Bringing Up Baby, Clementine is confident, quick-witted, quirky, and not shy about pursuing her love interest. She's also impulsive, having decided to erase Joel "almost as a lark," his friend Carrie explains. And like David, Susan's love interest, Joel is reserved, romantically inept, and overly absorbed in his work. He is uncharacteristically impulsive only once in the film, the morning after his memory erasure when he abruptly takes a train to the same spot where he and Clementine first met, hinting that the procedure was not fully successful. There is also an occasional antagonism between Joel and Clementine, which, as McDonald explains, is a typical screwball character dynamic, where romantic conflict "eventually modulate[s] [...] into loving behavior" (20). While Joel is unconscious after his memory erasure process begins, for instance, the narrative then begins to track this process, moving from Joel's most recent memories of Clementine to his earliest. These memories reveal conflicts in their relationship: an argument after Clementine drives home drunk, an earlier spat after Joel insults her fitness to be a parent, a still earlier argument after Clementine questions Joel's trust, among others. In these ways, they exemplify what Mortimer calls "the warring couple" of screwball comedy, "seemingly incongruous [...] [but] as they struggle to disentangle themselves they become more caught up in their inevitable shared fate" (32). This period of entanglement culminating in romantic reconciliation is, of course, not limited to screwball comedy, as all romcom types occasionally follow this narrative trajectory, such as *Pillow Talk*, *Some Like It Hot*,

The Graduate, and When Harry Met Sally. The matrimonial imperative, whether manifesting in the narrative as an actual wedding or an alternate image of romantic triumph, is simply endemic to the genre. Eternal Sunshine is no exception.

Having given a sense of the film's relation to romcom conventionality, I turn now to a discussion of its reimagining and reconfiguration of that conventionality. It is in these latter dimensions of the film, where there are clear departures from romcom narrative tradition, that it takes on a critical function. Specifically, by utilizing a variety of narrative disruptions—such as temporal/sequential distortions and blurred interior/exterior distinctions—the film evokes brokenness and disorder, creating a disconcerting narrative aesthetic. I read the film's use of this aesthetic as a feminist intervention in the genre. *Eternal Sunshine*, I argue, moves beyond an assimilatory feminist sensibility, discernible as an appeal to a baseline feminism, into a critical feminist mode, discernible as narrative alterations or effects that subvert romantic ideology. In what follows, I first examine instances of narrative disruption in the film, explaining how they function as a critique of romcom conventionality, and I will then examine the film's representations of male sexism and ineptitude, which have a distinctly feminist tone and extend the film's general critique of romantic ideology.

Narrative disruption takes two primary forms in the film: temporal and dimensional. The first incidence of temporal, or sequential, disruption occurs when we shift from the narrative's initial trajectory—comprised of Joel and Clementine's "meetcute" in Montauk and going on a "first" date to the Charles River—to a scene with Joel alone, driving his car and inexplicably sobbing. In the ensuing scenes, it becomes clear

that this shift is an instance of prolepsis, a term narratology uses to describe a flashforward in the narrative (Currie 31). That is, the scene of Joel driving occurs chronologically later than the film's opening sequence, but at this point, we cannot determine how much time has passed. In using this proleptic shift, at this narrative moment, the film interrupts what appears to be Joel and Clementine's early courtship, leaving us unsure of its direction or progression. There is also, though, a more complex disorientation that starts to emerge, as this jump ahead in narrative time begins to unsettle our temporal bearings. While this effect becomes more pronounced as the narrative advances, its presence here, in the film's first act, is a break from romcom convention, which more often entails an unambiguous exposition. Even in a romcom like *Enchanted*, for instance, which contains various unconventional elements of its own, the exposition is transparent and uncomplicated, establishing romantic tension between Giselle and Robert and making clear that her displacement from Andalasia will be a primary narrative conflict. In Gondry's film, instead of a conventional first sequence, the exposition is strangely abandoned, introducing an element of temporal complication that soon becomes a more general motif in the narrative.

This narrative technique, I want to suggest, may be read as a subtle repudiation of romcom convention. By treating romance as temporally disjointed and unstable, the film rejects—and treats with suspicion—the orderly, patterned narrative modes often used in romantic comedy. These conventional modes—screwball, sex comedy, radical, neotraditional—each present a set of narrative traits, making it possible to distinguish one from the other. And as noted above, *Eternal Sunshine* itself contains some of these traits.

But this film's conventional traits—screwball protagonists, romantic reconciliation—are fairly peripheral, submerged by its unusual narrative aesthetic. Grindon even calls the film "convoluted" and "fragmented," reflective of "struggles to find coherence in a world filtered through human subjectivity" (198). I would add that the film's representation of an elusive—or unstable—coherence is not limited to human subjectivity but extended to its treatment of romance as well. As noted above, the courtship arc that opens the film is oddly interrupted, momentarily undermining the coherence of its larger romantic narrative. This incoherence in the narrative, while eventually resolved, suggests a corresponding incoherence in both romcom conventionality and romantic ideology.

A further examination of temporal and dimensional disruptions in the film will make this multiform incoherence more apparent. The night that Joel's memory erasure takes place, narrative time becomes muddled and layered. This is in part because the narrative bifurcates, branching into two simultaneous diegetic "levels," as narrative theorists have termed them (Pier 547). The first (L1) is set at Joel's apartment—an exterior, physical space—while Lacuna technicians do their work; the second (L2) is set within Joel's unconscious mind—an interior, psychic space—while he dreams of salient moments during his two-year relationship with Clementine. Even though these two levels are synchronous, sharing a common "present," they are mainly distinct. More specifically, at L2, the narrative is focalized entirely through Joel. The narrative contents—or *fabula*—presented at this level are manifestations of Joel's psychology, particularly memories of Clementine. Even as Clementine and others in his memories appear as independent entities in this narrative space—seemingly endowed with

agency—they are in fact imaginary, figments of Joel's mind. At L1, the narrative is focalized externally and objectively. There is no single perspective or consciousness acting as a lens into this diegetic space, as with L2. There is also a single setting—Joel's apartment—whereas L2 shifts among many settings, flitting from memory to memory. Again, these narrative levels are *mainly* distinct, not entirely, because while Joel lies unconscious, he continues to hear sounds created in his apartment, even as he sleeps. At times, then, L1 intrudes upon L2, creating both temporal and dimensional distortion, where narrative phenomena occurring in one are momentarily present or discernible in the other.

One example is Joel's memory of being with Clementine at a Chinese food restaurant, which is part of L2. As this memory proceeds, Joel is suddenly disconcerted by sounds only he can hear: a phone number being dialed and an unknown person beginning a conversation, which are both occurring in L1, where one of the Lacuna technicians, Patrick Wertz, is calling Clementine. In effect, this moment demonstrates a porousness in the diegetic barrier between L1 and L2. Joel's consciousness becomes an occasional convergence point for the two narrative levels, since sensory stimuli present in L1 may elicit consequence in L2. This form of narrative instability, I want to suggest, further evokes incoherence and inconsistency. Like the proleptic shift discussed above, the slippage between L1 and L2 is disruptive, adding to the film's more general sense of disorientation. L2 even contains an additional disruptive element, as its narrative direction rarely adheres to any kind of intelligible pattern, at first moving in reverse chronological order through Joel's memories, but later moving more haphazardly.

On the whole, these disrupting effects—narrative level ambiguity and atemporal sequentiality—contribute to what Grindon calls the film's "surrealist combination of dream and reality" ("Taking Romantic Comedy Seriously" 209). This combination ultimately complicates and subverts romcom conventionality, replacing the genre's traditional narrative features with ones typical of postmodern fiction, like Atwood's *The Robber Bride*. Both Gondry's film and Atwood's novel contain fragmented narratives, where time and memory are treated as inherently unstable. The film and novel are also alike in their aspiration to reimagine and critique a particular narrative form, the fairy tale for Atwood, the romcom for Gondry. A final point of similarity is that both bring a distinctly feminist sensibility to bear on their chosen narrative forms, making more visible the troubling ideological dispositions of fairy tale and romantic comedy.

While one element of *Eternal Sunshine*'s feminism, as I've shown, consists in its reconfiguration of the romcom narrative and its suggestion of an incoherence in romantic ideology, there is a second element consisting in the film's representation of male sexism and ineptitude in romantic situations. We see this mainly in two secondary characters, Patrick and Dr. Howard Mierzwiak. Patrick is effectively Clementine's stalker. Just as he is assigned to perform Joel's memory erasure, Patrick was earlier assigned to Clementine's erasure, along with another Lacuna technician, Stan Fink. The night of Joel's procedure, Patrick tells Stan he has a new girlfriend, Clementine, who he is courting under false pretenses. Specifically, having conducted Clementine's procedure and gained access to intimate details of her relationship with Joel, Patrick now imitates Joel's romantic gestures, making it seem they originate with him. Patrick tells Stan that

he fell in love with Clementine the night of her erasure, as she lay their unconscious and defenseless. He also stole a pair of her underwear, which Stan first seems bothered by but then laughs at, signaling a tacit approval of Patrick's misbehavior. Patrick's character, moreover, brings a dark irony to the narrative. As a Lacuna technician, he is entrusted with the health and safety of the clinic's patients, but instead, he exploits his access to private information to advance his own sexual—and vaguely criminal—motives. Patrick represents a perversion of romance, and his manipulation of Clementine has sexist undertones since he presumes he can successfully deceive and charm her, which he does initially. His "courtship" of Clementine is cynical and abusive, and like his boss, Howard, he misuses Lacuna's technology to pursue selfish, unsavory interests.

Howard's misconduct is different from Patrick's though just as shameful. In the film's final act, we discover that Howard once had an adulterous affair with Mary Svevo, Lacuna's office receptionist. This comes as a twist since earlier scenes with Mary hint that she simply has a crush on him. There is no direct indication that they have been romantically involved. But on the night of Joel's procedure, Mary learns from Howard's wife, Hollis, the truth about her history with him, and then learns from Howard himself that she too has undergone Lacuna's procedure, erasing the memory of their affair. Howard says to Mary, "you wanted the procedure...you wanted it done so you could get past...," leaving his explanation incomplete. Later that night, though, when Mary secretly visits the Lacuna office and unearths the hidden audio recording of her own erasure consultation, it is implied, as she listens to the recording, that Howard pressured her to have the procedure. Like Patrick, he too has found a way to exploit memory

erasure, using it to conceal his infidelity. In seeing this capability in Howard, we are left to wonder how many other women he has led into Mary's situation. His behavior, in fact, is arguably more repugnant than Patrick's, given that he is Lacuna's founder and well aware, as he plainly says to Joel, that the service he provides is "technically [...] brain damage." In pressing Mary to undergo the procedure, then, Howard shows that he is willing to inflict permanent harm on someone in order to avoid personal risk or complication. This gives sexist undertones to Howard's character as well, as he lies to and manipulates the women close to him. And one final narrative element, with similar undertones, is Howard's nearly all male staff at Lacuna. Only one woman works at this medical clinic, a minor but suggestive detail. Lacuna is a conspicuously male space and enterprise, and we are left to wonder if Howard has made it this way intentionally.

In making these secondary male characters somewhat vile figures, *Eternal Sunshine* brings an unromantic element to a romcom narrative, creating ironies and tensions untypical of the genre. Significantly, though, Patrick and Howard are exposed, and each receives some measure of retribution. Clementine detects a phoniness in Patrick and ends her involvement with him, and Hollis presumably seeks a separation or divorce from Howard, after catching him with Mary. The film depicts sexist male behaviors but treats them with derision, adding another dimension to the film's feminism. In a related sense, Grindon notes that

romantic comedy can be progressive or conservative in its treatment of gender, [...] intermingling utopian aspirations and predatory manipulation in cultural forms [where] there exists a range of political expression. [The] two dominant characteristics of romantic comedy are its anti-authoritarianism and its impulse toward renewal and social transformation. As a result, comedy breaks taboos and attacks patriarchy, offering a weapon to all oppressed people. Furthermore,

romantic comedy demands a place for a woman and ideally calls for social change in the ascendancy of the young couple. ("Taking Romantic Comedy Seriously" 78)

In attributing this function to the romcom—where taboos are broken, patriarchy attacked, and social change demanded—Grindon brushes up against the more radical form of romcom I have called the critical feminist narrative in this chapter. *Eternal Sunshine* demonstrates the intermingling Grindon describes, by pairing the utopian "eternal sunshine" of memory erasure with the untoward conduct of men with power. The film also contains an anti-authoritarian element in its deconstruction and recreation of romcom conventionality, which act as feminist interventions in this narrative form.

In terms of renewal and social transformation, I will finish here by discussing one further element of the film, which has both a feminist and romantic character. By the time Clementine begins to express suspicion of Patrick, it is clear that Lacuna's procedure is not entirely effective. Mary's occasional flirtation with Howard, as well, can be read as residual attachment, a persistent romantic sentiment stirred by the "erased" love object. George Toles has suggested that the film "advances the powerful idea that beneath the barricades of hurt and the imagination's impulse to rewrite history after a relationship founders, there are a multitude of memories that plaintively retain the force of the original impression" (133). This is a deeply romantic idea, as it implies that Lacuna's promise of a "spotless mind" is ultimately false. The "impression" Toles describes is indelible, meaning that Joel and Clementine will always, however dimly, remember each other. In the film's final moments, after all has been revealed to the two characters, their romantic reconciliation is not compelled by convention—the romcom

matrimonial imperative—where the mere possibility of romance is sufficient to wipe away conflict. Rather, Joel and Clementine decide to restart their relationship with a more measured intention, having accepted the embarrassment and disappointment contained in their Lacuna consultation recordings, where they both freely comment on the other's faults and express their frustrations with the relationship.

Our last impression of Joel and Clementine, then, is of a deeper, more complex intimacy, evoking romantic renewal and promise. As a final narrative stroke, this impression is in line with romcom convention, but as they stand across from each other (see fig. 15), they turn their eyes to the floor and do not touch, suggesting an



Fig. 15. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

apprehension or guardedness. This hint of ambiguity is in line with the film's other forms of elusive meaning, like narrative disruption and temporal distortion, and it also serves as one further departure from romcom conventionality. *Eternal Sunshine*, as a critical feminist narrative, has a more subversive, less binding relation to the genre's conventions. Unlike *Enchanted*, whose feminist sensibility is more of an affectation or fashion, this film's feminist sensibility is more substantive, evinced by its commitment to

a different romantic aesthetic. Also, the film's use of narrative incoherence suggests a corresponding incoherence within the romantic ideology that has long informed romantic comedy.

In focusing on romantic comedy in this chapter, my objectives have been to examine historical tensions between this genre and feminism and to locate instances of feminism's absorption into romcom narrative discourse. As the foregoing has argued, this absorption is most legible in two forms: the assimilatory feminist narrative and the critical feminist narrative. Each of these romcom types—in different ways and degrees—demonstrates a relation between feminism and narrative form. And my two examples of these narrative types—*Enchanted* and *Eternal Sunshine*—like the novels examined in my earlier chapters, contain narrative disruptions and deconstructions, which can be read as feminist intervention or critique. All of these texts vex the terrain, so to speak, bringing a feminist sensibility to bear on narrative form and ultimately leveraging narrative form to question and subvert objectionable ideas about women, femininity and romance.

## **Notes**

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Each of these romantic comedies was among the highest grossing films the year of its release: 9 to 5 (1980), Arthur (1981), Tootsie (1982), Mr. Mom (1983), Romancing the Stone (1984), Splash (1984), The Jewel of the Nile (1985), Moonstruck (1987), Coming to America (1988) Look Who's Talking (1989), and When Harry Met Sally (1989).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> One of the best examples of a "nervous" romcom is Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), whose protagonist, Alvy Singer, is a neurotic comedian with a penchant for existential questions and humor. He's twice divorced, and most of the story is centered upon his new relationship with Annie Hall. Unlike romantic comedy of the 1960s, where protagonists almost always reach a point of romantic maturity or epiphanic transformation, "nervous" protagonists remain less settled and more conflicted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> *Happiest Season* was produced by TriStar pictures, part of the Sony Pictures Group, which is among the five largest, most lucrative film studios in the world.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Genericity, within the context of narrative theory, refers to a narrative's degrees (or levels) of correspondence to a discrete set of narrative genre conventions, such as with the *roman* à *clef*, *bildungsroman*, or epic poem. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, though, adds an important nuance: "[The] effective genericity of a text is not reducible to its status as a singularized member of a class whose definition in comprehension could be presupposed; it must be referred to the precise function that the member has performed in *the historical constitution* of the class. In order to understand the

generic function of a text "c," we must examine the generic tradition as it was at the time of "c," and not as we see it now, at the time of retrospective classification" (174). This is an important point with respect to romantic comedy, as it accounts for the unstable dynamic between genre conventionality and history.

- <sup>5</sup> Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Ruhama Goussinsky's *In the Name of Love: Romantic Ideology and Its Victims* (2008) includes the following concise description of what is meant by "romantic ideology": "In light of the centrality of love in our lives, it is no wonder that cultures all over the world have depicted an ideal form of romantic love towards which all of us are supposedly striving. Although this ideal may vary from one culture to another [...], it nevertheless is grounded in many cultures and appears to be present, in various formulations, in many periods. We term the basic features of this ideal, 'Romantic Ideology'. This ideology is common in the novels we read, the movies we see, the songs we hear, and in many other aspects of our culture. Romantic Ideology is part and parcel of the education our children receive from a very early age, when they begin to watch Disney's movies and listen to fairy tales" (2). Romantic comedy, of course, may function similarly, perpetuating notions of ideal love, along with a range of concomitant ideas about gender, sexual mores, courtship, fidelity, and the economics of marriage.
- <sup>6</sup> The strategy of creating subcategories of romantic comedies, as a way of accounting for fine nuances and vicissitudes in the genre over time, is fairly common within romcom criticism. My own use of this strategy is most influenced by Leger Grindon's *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (2011), an ambitious study of the genre, offering an overview of its cinematic origins, evolution and narrative form variety.
- <sup>7</sup> These historicized subcategories of the genre are fairly standard in the scholarship on romantic comedy. For further reading, see especially Tamar Jeffers McDonald's *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (2007) and Claire Mortimer's *Romantic Comedy* (2010).
- <sup>8</sup> Sleepless in Seattle was the fourth highest grossing film in the United States in 1993 and is among the top 20 highest grossing romantic comedies of all time.
- <sup>9</sup> For further discussion of *Taming of the Shrew*'s relationship to the genre historically, see Potter (2002), Jeffers McDonald (2007), and Mortimer (2010).
- <sup>10</sup> Potter's *I Love You But*...(2002) contains a comprehensive examination of Shakespearean conventions used in cinematic romantic comedy.
- <sup>11</sup> Leger Grindon gives a helpful explanation of why "screwball" was chosen to describe these films and their protagonists: "The term came from baseball and was associated with a pitch perfected by Carl Hubbell, a star for the New York Giants. The pitch had a fast, tricky spin curving the ball to elude the batter. The screwball protagonist was daffy, playful, quick, and usually the woman of the pair, though there were male screwballs as well, such as Johnny Case (Cary Grant) in *Holiday* (1938). But the screwball comedy gave a special emphasis to the unconventional woman. Assertive, self-reliant, and intelligent, the screwball woman was ready for the battle of the sexes and often provoked it" (Grindon 32).
- <sup>12</sup> Mortimer, Claire. *Romantic Comedy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Osgerby (100)
- <sup>14</sup> For a more substantive discussion of sex comedy conventionality, see Tamar Jeffers McDonald's *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (2007), pp. 44-47.
- <sup>15</sup> It's now well understood that representations of the harem indeed shifted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when accounts and images of harems housing numerous women began to circulate more widely in Europe. Many European paintings of harems from this period depict women living in these quarters as abject and disempowered, whereas earlier Medieval works depict women's cunning and charm and agency (Anwar 292). For further reading, see Anwar (2004).
- <sup>16</sup> Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie* (1969) is generally considered the first film produced in the United States to contain an uncensored scene.
- <sup>17</sup> Harnois, Catherine. "Re-presenting Feminisms."
- <sup>18</sup> For more on the history of these types of relationships in popular cinema, see "How movies brought polyamory into the mainstream" by Anna Smith (*The Guardian*, November 2017)
- <sup>19</sup> For more on conventional narrative overtures in the genre, see Mortimer (pp. 5-6) and Jeffers McDonald (pp. 11-12). <sup>20</sup> Grindon explains how the late 1970s had lost some of the utopian feeling of the sixties: "The shadow of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and a persistent economic stagnation spread a melancholy cynicism over the culture. The Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973 made abortion the wedge issue surrounding sexual politics and the tone turned from a sense of freedom to sharp division and moral recriminations. The optimistic movements for social change animating the sixties had split into identity politics with various groups jockeying for their own advantage rather than cooperating around a common purpose. The social changes from the sixties, which were still taking hold, mixed with a feeling of lost opportunities, limitation, and uncertainty" (Grindon 55).
- <sup>21</sup> The mermaid character rechristens herself "Madison" after learning to speak English. She only speaks her actual name—which has a delphinoid intonation and is thus unspeakable by humans—once in the film.
- <sup>22</sup> Cavell, Stanley. Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.
- <sup>23</sup> Landon, Brooks. Science Fiction After 1900. p. 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The term "rupture épistémologique" is credited to French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), who used it to describe a moment in scientific progress when new knowledge necessitates different ways of thinking about some object of study, such as pathogens or nuclear energy. Historically, as Bachelard explained, natural phenomena, like earthquakes, were by some considered otherworldly occurrences, either inexplicable or unfathomable by humans. The arrival of scientific understandings of these phenomena, then, created complication, or "rupture," for the epistemological foundations supporting conventional understandings (Oxford Reference).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Beverly Lemire's *Redressing the History of the Clothing Trade: Ready-Made Apparel, Guilds and Women Outworkers, 1650–1800* (1997) contains an excellent account of women's role in the apparel industry both before and after the Industrial Revolution.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Cavell (1981).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Burge, James. *Heloise & Abelard: A New Biography*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Thompson, G. R.."Introduction: Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition." *Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism.* Pullman: Washington State U P, 1974.

## Conclusion

Having examined these examples of narrative form as feminist critique, my concluding remarks here are intended to further contextualize my dissertation, as a contribution to feminist narratology, and to say a final word about Woolf's shadow. One text I have yet to mention but which informed this project is Rachel Blau DuPlessis's Writing Beyond the Ending, a study of twentieth century women's narratives. DuPlessis suggests that "narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live" (3). This idea has profound implications for feminist criticism, as it suggests treating narrative form itself as an instrument—a working apparatus—of ideology. As a feminist application of this idea, we could consider how the form of any particular narrative—its sequentiality, linearity, temporality, genericity, or other element—reinforces or resists patriarchal ideology.

To illustrate, I will briefly consider one final narrative, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. For many, the conclusion of this play is surprising. The protagonist, Nora Helmer, decides to leave her home, where she has lived for the past several years with her husband and children. Her decision comes rather abruptly, but this feels intended by Ibsen, perhaps meant to swiftly thwart any expectation the audience may have for Nora and her husband, Torvald, to reconcile. The play's ending does more than thwart expectations, though; it provokes outrage. Between 1879 and 1881, when *A Doll's House* was first performed for European audiences, the initial reception included a variety of protestations and invectives, as Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer explains. In Germany, a prominent actress of the period, Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, "had announced

her intention to present the play with herself in the leading role, but she refused to act the final scene as written, on the grounds that '[she] would never leave [her] children!'" (Meyer 459). One German critic, Paul Lindau, wrote that the play's original ending was "both illogical and immoral," while another, Karl Frenzel, called the play "repulsive" (Meyer 460). In England, the play would not even make it to the stage for the first time in its original form, but instead as an adaptation entitled *Breaking a Butterfly*, co-written by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman. Jones gave the following account of the adaptation:

A rough translation from the German version of *A Doll's House* was put into my hands, and I was told that if it could be turned into a sympathetic play, a ready opening would be found for it on the London boards. I knew nothing of Ibsen, but I knew a great deal of Robertson and H. J. Byron. From these circumstances came the adaptation called *Breaking a Butterfly*. (Jones 208)

Apparently a "sympathetic" play is one that reaffirms the sanctity of the family, particularly women's unerring devotion to this ideal. In his review of Jones and Herman's adaptation, H. L. Mencken said that *Breaking a Butterfly* "denaturized" Ibsen's play, and that the adaptation's revised ending—where "the curtain fell upon a happy home"—felt untrue to the source material (Mencken 185). Clearly, *A Doll's House* struck a particular nerve among these first audiences, with the greatest indignation directed at the ending, where Nora refuses Torvald's pleas for reconciliation and instead chooses an unknown, solitary future.

While indignant reactions to provocative literature are certainly nothing new, these responses to Ibsen's play are remarkable nonetheless as expressions of widespread aggrievement, as though the play somehow encroached on a value held by many in the

audience. I want to suggest, moreover, that this aggrievement is in part ideological. Its intensity and commonness, that is, may reflect more than aesthetic or stylistic criticism. It could reflect a deeper, more personal objection, arising from moral or cultural sensibilities. In telling this story about a woman's attainment of greater self-knowledge and subsequent decision to leave her husband, Ibsen managed to offend a sizable portion of his audience. Something about Nora's narrative arc, particularly its ending, was—and perhaps still is—objectionable. The play's narrative form is somehow transgressive, trespassing an unspoken but discernible boundary. DuPlessis's theorization of narrative form's ideological function is again helpful here, especially her detail about feminist criticism:

[Within narrative form] are produced and disseminated the assumptions, the conflicts, the patterns that create fictional boundaries for experience. [...] To compose a work is to negotiate with these questions: What stories can be told? How can plots be resolved? What is felt to be narratable by both literary and social conventions? Indeed, these are issues very acute to certain feminist critics and women writers, with their senses of the untold story, the other side of a well-known tale, the elements of women's existence that have never been revealed. (3)

A Doll's House brings to light some of these assumed or patterned boundaries of experience. By overstepping them, the play indeed represents the kind of untold story DuPlessis describes. The play also demonstrates, finally, how alterations to narrative form may serve as social criticism. By having Nora resist the force of gendered convention, Ibsen calls attention to both women's social conditions and gendered normativity. The play amounts to a feminist intervention in narrative form.

As a general description of feminist narratology's value to literary study, Kathy Mezei has explained that it "helps us understand our responses to the narratives we read and to the role that gender plays in our reading" (11). Making sense of these harsh responses to *A Doll's House*—or to any text that vexes the terrain of narrative convention—is part of the work of feminist narratology. The foregoing chapters have shown additional dimensions of this work, examining variations in narrative form across a range of literary and cinematic texts: regionalist and Modernist fiction, a postmodern trickster tale, and romantic comedy. By pairing feminism and narratology, my dissertation has aspired not only to better understand the interplay between gender and narrative form, but also to demonstrate a feminist narratological praxis, reading narrative variations as instances of feminist critique and intervention. These variations, as I see it, represent evasions of the masculinized shadow Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*. If this shadow's persistent presence in narrative has imposed a darkened boundary around which stories may be told, how they are told, and who gets to tell them, the texts discussed in this dissertation forge past that boundary, bringing a feminist sensibility to bear on narrative conventionality.

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