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Margaret Atwood's Gendered Pasts in *Moral Disorder*

As Nancy Forestell, Kathryn McPherson, and Cecylia Morgan claim in their introduction to the collection *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada*, the social history of Canada needs to be viewed from perspectives different from the conventional masculinist ones and "gendered dimensions of […] twentieth-century Canadian history" should be explored (7). They argue that not only women's history, but also men's alternative histories need to be discovered. In her collection of interrelated short stories *Gendered Pasts*, Margaret Atwood studies the changing history of Canadian women from the 1950s onwards. She intricately relates the ideas of tidiness and order to her plot, which should not surprise the reader familiar with her theory of novel writing and reading as a labyrinthine process (Howells 1). Her central character, whose name in the later stories turns out to be Nell, is a young teenager in the 50s. From that period onwards her life and opinions change in the way expectations towards women evolved in the Canadian society. Transformations in thinking and social norms are presented on her example, even though when she is in her thirties and she is the mistress of a married man called Tig she is not very representative of all women in general. The collection is fairly autobiographical, even though the word "semi-autobiographical" appears to be more suitable, since the experience of Nell must be based on Atwood's

own social observations when she was growing up and maturing rather than on her personal experiences. After all, as she herself observed in the text "Witch Craft," "there is a difference between true confessions and writing a novel" (Peri 31). When asked about the autobiographical quality of *Moral Disorder* in an interview, Atwood responded: "Let's say it is a story about what I would have been like if I hadn't been who I was" (Surmiak-Domańska 16). As Natalie Cooke notes, Atwood was "raised during a time when girls were taught that they should only speak if and when they were spoken to, or, alternatively, if they had nice things to say" so the author's "honest and forthright way of speaking her mind is striking" (20). Atwood's background was indeed different from the most frequent one, since she was not altogether surrounded by conventional images of femininity in her childhood and youth. As she reminisces on it,

> The orientation of my entire family was scientific rather than literary […] So while the society around me, in the fifties, was very bent on having girls collect china, become cheerleaders, and get married, my parents were from a different culture. They just believed that it was incumbent on me to become as educated as possible. (Staines 12)

Nevertheless, although Atwood's parents were scientists, they were not able to separate her from those alternative stereotypes of girlishness altogether, which allowed her to remember them and record them in the short story *The Art of Cooking and Serving.* The story reveals its identity of an alternative autobiography, since Nell's parents move to the North of Canada for winter like Atwood's parents did. Nell is not as lucky as Atwood was since nobody makes her realize the fallacies incumbent in the models set up for girls. She is introduced to the readers as an eleven-year-old who has a younger brother and whose mother has got pregnant for the third time. The girl wants to knit a layette for the baby since she thinks that this is the right way of preparing herself for the change in the family structure. Despite her early age she is very much oriented towards the typical "feminine" occupations and developing the

"feminine" virtues of agility, activeness in the household and always doing things at the right time:

> If I dawdled, the baby might arrive before I was ready for it and be forced to wear some sort of mismatched outfit put together out of hand-me-downs. I'd started on the leggings and the mittens, as being fairly simple—mostly alternate rows of knit and purl, with some ribbing thrown in. That way I could work up to the jacket, which was more complicated. I was saving the bonnet to the last: it was going to be my *chef-d'oeuvre.* It was to be ornamented with satin ribbons to tie under the baby's chin–the possibilities of strangulation through ties like that had not yet been considered–and with huge ribbon rosettes that would stick out on either side of the baby's face like small cabbages. Babies dressed in layettes, I knew from the pictures in the Beehive pattern book, were supposed to resemble confectionary—clean and sweet, delicious little cakelike bundles decorated with pastel icing. (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 11)

At that point of her life she is a budding perfectionist since she thinks that the material world should be given the right shape. The shape she accepts it to have is the one she knows from catalogues and magazines about good housekeeping. She produces baby clothes with the illusion that if they are made in accordance with those patterns, the reality will also be tidy and orderly. The adjectives "clean and sweet, delicious" that she uses in reference to the imaginary babies well reflect her unrealistic perception of the world and similarly faulty expectations towards it.

However, she notices that the ideal orderly world does not go well with the reality of her mother's pregnancy. Her mother is not agile at all, but tired and unable to continue to impose order in her surroundings. Nell visibly feels anxiety when confronted with her mother, who "turned herself into this listless, bloated version of herself, thus changing the future—my future—into something shadow-filled and uncertain" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 16). According to Nell the mother no longer comes up to the expectations issued towards women, since:

> Normally she was a person who went for swift, purposeful walks, or skated around rinks in winter at an impressive speed, or swam with a lot of kicking, or rattled up the dishes—she called it rattling them up. She always knew what to do in an emergency, she was methodical and cheerful, she took command. Now it was as if she abdicated. (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 14)

Nell is so much scared of her mother's condition that she refuses to use the "blunt, bulgy, pendulous" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 12) word "pregnant," preferring the term "expecting," which implies for her "happy anticipation" of a dog (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 12). There is also more tidiness in the latter word than with the realistic and precise idea of "pregnant." She is placed in the role of someone "generally helpful" in the household (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 13) and no one asks her if she agrees to take on this role. It is not strange then that she reacts to all the changes in her situation with anger, even though she stifles the anger since such are the social expectations towards girls. She projects the irritation onto knitting: "My style of knitting required total concentration and caused my arms to ache, and irritated me a lot" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 10). Nevertheless, when she was performing the task she expected the knit set to look "pristine, gleaming, admirable, a tribute to my own goodwill and kindness. I hadn't yet realized it might also be a substitute for them" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 12). This illustrates the possible frustrations of all women expected to play traditional female roles. They act in accordance with social expectations, but are not satisfied with their lives. The lives may be suffused with the "fright" that Nell experiences (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 13) or even fear that she feels when she watches her mother swim and imagines her drown (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 15). They are the fright and fear of the uncontrollable, since real life cannot be groomed into what one sees in women's magazines.

The idealized image of life and the reality surrounding the girl are clearly mismatched. This can be observed in the important scene of Nell reading Sarah Field Splint's *The Art of Cooking and Serving*, which "held [her] in thrall" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 18) with its two chapters, "The Servantless House" and "The House with a Servant." The author of

The Art advocates the importance of "clean linen and shining silver" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 18) and the right arrangement of the table. She compares and contrasts the practices described there with those of her mother and wonders what Mrs Splint would think of the "grubby" nature of her mother's household activities (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 20). Nell develops an obsession with tidiness at that point of her life and sees that some of the things she uses herself, such as wrapping paper for the knitted set, are "not entirely clean" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 20), so they do not match her idealized picture of perfect femininity. She studies the book from the perspective of the servant system, which is supposed to "transform an untidy, inexperienced girl into a well-groomed, professional servant" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 19). Such phrases, recurring in the household management textbooks, make Nell reflect: "*Transform* was the word I seized on. Did I want to transform, or be transformed? Was I to be the kind homemaker, or the formerly untidy maid? I hardly knew" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 19).

Only when the baby is born does she realize that her role is that of a servant, not that of a homemaker as a manager of servants. Her mother is not a manager, either, but an exhausted person. Nell's duty starts to be putting the baby to sleep, cleaning the bathroom, and washing the dishes. She enters the world in which tidying up and child-care are exclusively feminine duties, but she does not do it willingly. Even though she does not know the cultural sources of the convictions concerning the social roles for women, she starts to loath them as she experiences their negative consequences. The idea of a homemaker as a home goddess in Canadian society must have originated in the cultural influence coming from the United States. This is where the idea of a homemaker as a model of female perfection flourished in the 1950s, making the lives of numerous women miserable, since they were not able to come up to the unrealistically high standards.[1] The story *The*

[1] Betty Friedan's famous *Feminine Mystique* demonstrates the high expectations of women in the post-war United States (2001), while the image of wives as those who took exclusive care of the household appears in Judy Syfers's 1975 text *Why I Want a Wife* (2001).

Art of Cooking and Serving shows similar unhappiness both on the part of Nell's mother and on that of the girl herself. Eva Mackey argues that Canada has been "marginal and victimized by various forms of colonialism, most recently American cultural imperialism" (Mackey 39). The model of femininity based on taking care of the household may be a part of this colonialism and cultural imperialism and Nell visibly rebels against it. She confronts the practical realization of "the art of cooking and serving" and probably realizes that tidiness and order, the primary virtues in this world, are ill-suited to make any woman, young or older, happy. She rebels when her mother asks to put her sister to sleep again, is slapped on the face, but feels liberated. As she relates it: "I also felt set free, as if released from an enchantment. I was no longer compelled to do service" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 23). The enchantment once exercised by *The Art of Cooking and Serving* is gone. Perhaps even Nell is aware of the Americanization of Canadian culture in the way the general public started to be aware of it in the 1960s (Goetsch 169).

Apart from the sociological explanation of the US cultural influence on Canadian society, anthropology with its concept of pollution and dirt is also a possible tool for analyzing the significance of tidiness in the social life presented in Atwood's stories. In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas famously argued that there exists a similarity between Western European culture and other, more "primitive" ones, in that dirt and defilement provoke fear. Objectively dirt is not dangerous, but also in our culture it is a phenomenon tantamount to disorder and it "offends against order" (2). Consequently, "eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (Douglas 2). The gesture of eliminating dirt is then not only performed for health reasons, but in order to reinstitute order in the surrounding reality. It is grounded in the fear of pollution. Hygiene is not the only motivation for tiding up. As Douglas claims, respect for conventions is equally important (8). In the Canadian society of the 1950s conventions mattered more than what women could really want from life. As a result, they were the sex expected to act as if obsessed with the very thought of uncleanness creeping around them and disturbing the supposed order

of the world they lived in. Furthermore, Douglas adds the pollution resulting from giving birth, so from a specifically feminine issue, to the list of polluting factors in other cultures (82), but the Western culture also appears to be focused on considering birth as unclean. For Nell her pregnant mother's body was also disorderly as it was the body which was no longer under control.

Nell is finally released from the compulsion to tidy up and act as a servant when her sister is a teenager and they are both left alone at home once the parents have gone away on a journey of their dreams to Europe. Anthropologically speaking, disorder demonstrates its two-faceted nature: it is not only dangerous, but also liberating through the power it entails, as Douglas argued (117). In the text Nell is no longer someone who aspires to be a perfect homemaker. Instead, she relishes the disorder of family life when the parents are not around:

> Our days fell into a strange pattern, or lack of pattern. We got up when we felt like it and went to bed at irregular hours. We ate our meals here and there around the house, and let the dirty dishes pile up on the kitchen counter before doing them. Sometimes we took our lunches down to the cellar, where it was cooler. We read detective stories and bought women's magazines, which we leafed through *in order to rearrange ourselves, though only in theory* [emphasis mine — A.C.]. I was too tired to do much of anything else; or not tired, sleepy. I'd fall asleep on the chesterfield in the middle of the day, sink down into cavernous dreams, then wake up groggily toward suppertime, feeling hungover. Ordinarily I never took naps. (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 43)

Rearranging themselves is purely theoretical, since they do not feel up to imposing any order even on themselves, not to mention the household. The disorder of summertime life that they live brings them closer to each other and shows that there is more to life than cleaning and observing a fixed schedule of the day. Nell becomes more similar to her usually disorderly sister and notices this similarity as something important.

The idea that tidiness and order should be central to a woman's life belonged only to Nell's very early youth. When she is older she also starts to rebel against the school system in which the impeccably dressed Miss Bessie teaches her class narratives of victimized women as a part of their English literature course. For Nell Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* firstly becomes the object of fantasies on violence against women. The fantasies are inspired by her reading of detective fiction and are put in her notebook as notes from the reading:

> *He bumped her off,* I wrote. *Bumped her off* was not a thing I would ever have said out loud in class, as it was slang and Miss Bessie disapproved of such sloppy and vulgar talk. I'd picked up *bumped off* from the detective stories I was in the habit of reading as a way of evading my homework, or at least delaying it […] *Bumped off,* I wrote. The Duke had bumped off the Duchess. Cheap floozies often got bumped off, and so did hot tomatoes and dumb bunnies, and so did sleazy broads. *Bumped* suggested a blow to the head with a blunt instrument, such as a blackjack, but this was not likely the method the Duke had used on the Duchess. Nor had he buried her in the cellar and covered up the grave with wet cement, or cut her up into pieces and heaved the pieces into the lake or dropped them down a well or left them in a park, like the husbands in some of the more grisly narratives I'd read. I thought he's most likely poisoned her. (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 54)

Even the language a woman is expected to be "clean" in the school system that Miss Bessie is a part of. Violence against women can be a source of excitement in the detective fiction, but when Nell reflects on it, it is a serious matter, since she can be angry with the Duchess for being "a dumb bunny" for not seeing the danger she was in (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 72). Obviously what young Nell does is blaming the victim, but at least she observes the victimization of women in Western culture and objects to being taught almost exclusively such texts as a canon. Also Tess of the d'Urbervilles is for her "evidently another of those lucky pushovers" and Ophelia is yet another (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 74). Nell is angry with the literary characters as "They were

too trusting, they found themselves in the hands of the wrong men, they weren't up to things, they let themselves drift" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 74). She refuses to be a part of such a world and believes that schoolgirls should not be socialized by reading such stories lest they start treating these heroines as models of feminine behaviour. Relating this to tidiness and order, she refuses to be a part of the reality in which women are encouraged to be clean, spotless, and naive only to be victimized after they fulfil these requirements.

She cannot, however, fully abandon the thinking about gender roles to which she has been socialized. This is how she visualizes the social position of men and that of women and how she emotionally reacts to them:

> We'd like to use our wits, work our way up the ladder provided for us, make something of ourselves. The boys were expected to become doctors, lawyers, dentists, accountants, engineers. As for us girls, we weren't sure where we were headed. If we didn't go on, we'd have to get married, or else become old maids; but with a good set of grades, this dismaying fork in the road could be postponed for a while. (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 58)

The citation proves how strong the matrix imposed on Canadian females in the 1950s was. The cultural influence originating in the US influenced their thinking about some future professional life and the examples of women's family lives they knew where mostly not encouraging. In the culture described in the story *My Last Duchess,* not only is there no place for women in the social life other than at home, but even the female bodies of schoolgirls are out of place: "Breasts were one thing: they were in front, where you could have some control over them. Then there were bums, which were behind, and out of sight, and thus more lawless. Apart from loosely gathered skirts, nothing much could be done about them" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 60). Again the topic of controlling disorder appears here. The disorder of a female body has to be harnessed, but the effects will always be not satisfactory enough. Girls are seen through their bodies and also, importantly, see

themselves as collections of shameful and untidy bodily parts that have to be controlled so that they were not visible too much. As for morals, they avoid the very thought of being "shoddy" in how they behave (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 63). This is how Atwood herself summarized the pitfalls for girls when she was one: "We were told that there were certain 'right,' 'normal' ways to be women, and other ways that were wrong. The right ways were limited in number. The wrong ways were endless" (Atwood, *If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All* 15).

My Last Duchess is also a section where the two disorders, the physical untidiness of places and the "moral disorder" of intimate relationships are set side by side. When Nell visits her boyfriend Bill she is impressed by the physical order of his parents' house:

> This was a rule at Bill's house: shoes left at the door. Bill's mother had a job – she worked at a hospital, though she wasn't a nurse – but despite her job she kept the house spotless. It smelled of cleaning products – Javex bleach and lemon-oil furniture polish – with an undertone of mothballs. It was as if the whole house had been soaked in preservatives to keep it from ever changing, because change meant dirt. (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 69)

All dirt or even lack of adequate cleanness are carefully avoided in this house and Bill's mother demonstrates the female ability to have two jobs at the same time, one professional and one at home. The house demonstrates the mother's obsession with controlling the reality, since it may change if not controlled adequately. All change is the same as dirt for her, so the changing morals of the late 1950s and early 1960s may also mean dirt, disorder, and pollution that all have to be avoided. As a result, Nell did not fit into the world image of Bill's mother: "Bill's mother didn't altogether approve of me. I'd learned about this kind of approval—the age-old disapproval of mothers toward any girl dabbling in their sons—from *Chatelaine* and *Good Housekeeping* (*Your Mother-in--Law: Best Friend or Worst Enemy?*), so I hadn't been surprised by the chilliness of her smile" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 70). Importantly, Nell

and Bill's studying of English literature includes the moral disorder of "fumbling around on the sofa bed" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 70).

When Nell became an adult morals changed and "Sexual jealousy was like using the wrong fork, marriage was a joke, and those already married found their once-solid unions crumbling like defective stucco" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 82). This is when she becomes a secretary and the mistress of her employer Tig, who is still married to Oona and has two sons with her. The triangle they form is unconventional, since Tig does not want to live with his wife, but does not intend to divorce her, either. This is very much in accordance with the atmosphere of the 1960s, when "a wave […] swept through, changing the landscape completely" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 82). The material world also changed a lot then: "Miniskirts and bell-bottoms […] made a brief appearance, to be replaced immediately by sandals and tie-dyed T-shirts. Beads […] sprouted, communes […] sprung up, thin girls with long straight hair and no brassieres were everywhere" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 82). The material world reflected social change, which allowed such people as Tig and Oona to have unconventional marriages which still lingered for some time. The story ends happily for Nell, who suffered the most because of the confusion she lived in. Tig finally divorces Oona, who is so dissatisfied with it that she demands money from him. Then Tig and Nell can form a more conventional relationship. Nell is presented as imprisoned within the moral disorder of Tig's marital arrangements and liberated once she does not have to be his mistress any longer. At the point when Tig is still married to Oona but lives with Nell, he is simply a man of his times: the 1960s marked the advent of a long-haired sexual explorer and Tig appears to conform to this pattern to some extent, while his hairstyle does not matter. Nell becomes "clean" again when Tig gets divorced, but this is not the cleanness as understood by the society, but she is "clean" in her own eyes and according to her own morality. When Tig was still married it was Oona who introduced Nell into his life: "The addition of Nell as a fixture in Tig's life had been taken in stride by Oona—why not, since it had been partly her doing? She's introduced Tig and Nell, she'd facilitated their—what would you call it? Their thing" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 175). The citation shows

how moral standards changed since the 1950s of *The Art of Cooking and Serving*.

In the story *The Labrador Fiasco* Atwood portrays yet another usage of the word "clean." Men's moral cleanness has always been understood differently, since when writing about polar expeditions of the early twentieth century she refers to the cleanness of explorers. "This was in 1903, when exploration was still in vogue as a test of manliness, and when manliness was still in vogue, and was thought to couple naturally with the word *clean*. Manliness, cleanliness, the wilderness, where you could feel free. With gun and fishing rod, of course. You could live off the land" (Atwood, *Moral Disorder* 191). The masculine cleanness does not refer to tidiness or morality at all, but rather implies that through exploration a man gets closer to nature in its cleanness and unspoiled quality.

In the interview already quoted here Atwood stated that the models imposed on women in contemporary societies constantly change and are thus impossible to reconcile with one another (Surmiak-Domańska 25). The nationalistic ideologies also in Canada have made women "important to nation-building in multiple ways: biologically, as reproducers of the nation; culturally, as producers and defenders of culture; and symbolically, as symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collective will" (Mackey 33). The life of Atwood's character becomes a lens through which Canada is viewed: when she was a child, the pre-war British colonialism ended, but it was replaced by the cultural imperialism of Canada's Southern neighbour. *Moral Disorder* continues Atwood's tendency to represent the world she lives in, which according to David Staines was discernible even in her earliest texts (15). To cite him, "from her earliest writing, [Atwood] was determined to be a lens focusing outwards on the world around her" (Staines 15). In *Moral Disorder* her lens keeps being directed towards the sociological and even anthropological ideas of order and tidiness, both physical and moral, and the re-evaluation of these issues in the changing decades of Canada in the twentieth century.

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