

BLADES, SONYA ELISA, Ph.D. *A Satire of Their Own: Subjectivity, Subversion, and the Rewriting of Literary History in Women's Satire of the Twentieth Century*. (2016) Directed by Dr. Robert Langenfeld. 247 pp.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the study of literary satire, particularly twentieth century works that are more aligned with the complexity and ambiguity found in Menippean satire. Despite the abundance of scholarship about satire produced within the past decade, twentieth century women's satire is an area that has been largely ignored. One reason why there are so few studies about women's satire is that women theorists and critics distance themselves from the genre, making the argument that satire and women's writing are in contention with one another. Because satire is an important tool used by the oppressed to mock their oppressors, this dissertation aims to uncover how women writers of the twentieth century use specific techniques of satire to deride the literary establishment that attempts to categorize and rank genres as 'literary' while marginalizing women's ways of writing. I make the argument that parody and irony, both often used for the purpose of satirizing, are the two most common tools women writers use to critique the literary tradition. Furthermore, women's satire uses humor and an emphasis on the subjective experiences of women to deflate the masculine focus on empiricism, objectivity, and literary exclusivity.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories related to Menippean satire, parody, dialogism, carnival and the novel are used in this study to offer a framework of how women writers situate their criticisms of patriarchal hegemonies and hierarchies, including those within the male dominated literary tradition. Women satirists favor the Menippean form because of its ambiguity, playfulness, malleability and resistance to easy categorization,

as well as the genre's roots in the communal and egalitarian features of carnival. In addition, poststructural feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler add insight as to why women's writing, including satire, is often misread by men when considering its refusal to fit neatly into the literary tradition and within distinct genre boundaries. This project intends to recover satire as an 'available means' for the woman writer. The chapters in this study offer examples of women writers within various literary movements of the twentieth century – Virginia Woolf, Stella Gibbons, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood – who satirically parody established genres including biography, history, rural fiction, the fairy tale and dystopian literature.

A SATIRE OF THEIR OWN: SUBJECTIVITY, SUBVERSION, AND THE
REWRITING OF LITERARY HISTORY IN WOMEN'S SATIRE
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2016

Approved by

Committee Chair

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To my family.

Mom and Dad, for your never-ending support and confidence in me.

Cyril, you have been my rock, and I could not have finished this project without your
love, patience and understanding.

And to the newest addition to our family, the smiley Audie: you made this process
interesting, little one; I would not have had it any other way. This is for you, peanut.

APPROVAL PAGE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee – Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly, Dr. Ben Clarke, and Dr. Robert Langenfeld – for their support and guidance. Their advice and feedback were essential to the completion of this project, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to work with such wonderful, insightful people. I am especially grateful to Dr. Roskelly for being my advisor and mentor for ten years (!) of graduate study. I’ve thanked Hepsie more times than I can count, but I can never say “thank you” enough. Her encouragement and confidence in my project kept me going during the most difficult times.

I also want to thank the staff members who work so hard managing everyone in the English Department, a job that seems more appropriately described as “herding cats” at times, I’m sure. I sincerely thank Alyson Everhart, administrative assistant extraordinaire, for tirelessly answering my many questions, making sure everything was in order, and, more importantly, for being a friend.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank all of my friends and colleagues at UNCG for the stimulating discussions, helpful suggestions, and the kind of camaraderie that keeps a person sane during the dissertation process. There are too many to name everyone here, but I want to give a special shout-out to Laurie Lyda and Leah Milne, two strong, inspiring women who certainly understand the value of humor and community within academia. Thanks for repeatedly telling me, “You can do this!” and for the thought-provoking conversations and laughter over good food.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Satire has a long history of transgressing social boundaries, with writers relishing in the ability to collectively entertain *and* infuriate readers as social and political institutions are brought down through wit, humor, and oftentimes outright aggression. Traditionally speaking, it functions as a way to ridicule human vices and follies or specific persons or establishments, either as a way to cope with injustices or absurdities in life, or, more importantly, as a means to enact actual social change. Using techniques such as irony, double entendre, caricature, and humor, satire is given the creative license to denigrate what would otherwise be too risky and dangerous to attack. Twentieth century writers have taken advantage of the diverse, often playful qualities of the genre, blending various subgenres and exaggerating for comic effect, whether that comedy be light and teasing or terrifyingly dark and distressing.

In the past decade or so, there has been a resurgence in the study of satire as both a cultural phenomenon and an art form. One collection, the expansive Blackwell companion to satire, includes contemporary essays that primarily reestablish traditional understandings of satirical terminology, techniques, and characteristics associated with particular periods. Another recent text, Jonathan Greenberg's *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, is more specialized in that it reviews and redefines many of these traditional

understandings of satire in light of new studies of modernist fiction, emphasizing the compatibility, even *necessity*, of satire during a time of rapid social change, mass production, and shifts in value systems. While Greenberg's work is valuable in its new approach toward satire as an inherent element of modernist culture, and as comprehensive as the Blackwell essays appear to be in their variety and expansiveness, one alarming absence continues to haunt studies of satire: the complete absence of any discussion concerning women satirists as a whole, especially women satirists of the twentieth century and how theories about women's writing directly relate to changes in satirical study.

When mentioned at all, critics of satire have relegated women satirists to the margins of history, as though only extraordinary or exceptional women writers made use of satirical strategy to condemn human foibles and societal ills. In most critical texts about satire, the reader may find the usual suspects mentioned, typically Jane Austen and Aphra Behn, and any accounts of gender in satire are generally about depictions *of* women and not depictions *by* women. The only essay to mention gender in Blackwell's collection of twenty-nine essays, Claudia Karioff's "Gendering Satire: Behn to Burney," concludes its analysis at the end of the nineteenth century, which has been the common occurrence in studies of satire. As recently as 1995, Brian Connery and Kirk Combe's collection of essays in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism* includes not one woman satirist in the index, and their introduction implies that women themselves have distanced themselves from the "power and attack" of satire. They state directly that feminist critics have seen satire "as radically masculinist, and in fact a form of power

exerted frequently against women” (12). However, despite admitting that little work has been done on women satirists, this collection of essays does nothing to expel these attacks on satire and extend the conversation about the issue, implying that it is out of the scope of the collection.

In fairness to Connery and Combe’s introduction to *Theorizing Satire*, there is truth in their statement concerning feminist critics’ lack of focus on satire, or what they claim is a refusal to use the term *satire* and instead replace it with *humor* or *comedy*, which, as they argue, implies that “satire is indeed gendered” (12). Along with the resurgence in satirical study, feminist critics of the 1990s such as Gloria Kaufman, Regina Barreca, Judy Little and, more recently and specific to twentieth century literature, Eileen Gillooly have pioneered studies in women’s humor and how it differs from that of their male contemporaries. But not all of women’s satirical moments are comedic, and not all humorous moments are for the sake of satire. So how can scholars rescue the relationship between women writers, satire, and its relationship to the comic? If what Virginia Woolf states in *A Room of One’s Own* is true, that “when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important” (81), then it should not be denied that these women are, in fact, exercising their satirical wit in altering those values, whether explicitly comical or not. Instead of the violent diatribe and abusive mocking of what cannot be changed, something which traditional satire has often been accused of, women’s satire has the

same motives and techniques described by those feminist critics who study humor because humor is one of the most often used techniques of the woman satirist.

Without attempting to generalize or essentialize women's writing, this study posits specific characteristics of women's satire that allow women to navigate a genre that has been studied and analyzed through a traditional framework established and advanced primarily by men. It offers an alternative discourse that challenges traditional understandings of satire and the literary tradition as masculinist, as well as the literary tradition as a whole and how women are situated within that tradition. In their introduction to *Available Means*, Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald write, "when a woman does appear [in an anthology], she is often described in heroic terms, alone and rising above her natural capabilities" (xix). Women writers have always used methods of satire, and my aim throughout this study is to bring awareness to the fact that women writers of the twentieth century typically use specific elements of satire, particularly parody and irony, to challenge, reverse, and lampoon the mostly male literary establishment. Each one of the women in this study is not a special case, but each offers a solid example of how women use satirical techniques to negotiate a space that has traditionally been hostile to their attempts at inclusion.

The central argument tying these women writers together is that they especially use parody, irony, reversal and humor in order to imitate and revise the literary tradition, mocking its hierarchies, exclusion of women, and attempts at stabilizing literature in support of the status quo. The study of twentieth century women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Stella Gibbons, Margaret Atwood, and Angela Carter fill in the gap in studies of

satire by showing how women's satire often parodies specific characteristics of the male-centered literary tradition and history by using irony to subvert and transform traditional genres. This transformation creates a space for new traditions and histories that welcome the female writer. My goal for this project is to allow for what Annette Kolodny refers to as a "rereading" and reevaluation of women's satirical methodology. She states that "whether we speak of poets and critics 'reading' texts or writers 'reading' (and thereby recording for us) the world, we are calling attention to interpretive strategies that are learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected" (452). My hope is that this study will uncover a women's way of writing satire within the twentieth century, thus opening the door to further studies and rereadings of a genre in which women have been ever present but ignored. As Ritchie and Ronald insist, it is important to "mark the ways in which women have discovered various means by which to make their voices heard" (xvii). Women satirists have their own history of using irony and parody as their 'available means,' and the understanding of satire must be reconceived to open the discussion of how women have situated themselves within the satiric tradition.

Furthermore, this study aims to complicate the gendering of satire as male and refutes the allegations that satire is necessarily violent, abusive, domineering, and conservative in its approach. The women writers included in this study are often tongue-in-cheek and more ambiguous than traditional satirists, welcoming the various interpretations of their readers and calling for a more radical approach of activism built on community, equality, and social justice. As a whole, I hope the following chapters encourage others to see that the definitions and traditional studies of satire need to be

deconstructed and reassessed so that women's ways of writing and the rhetorical purpose of satire are no longer believed to be at odds with one another. Women writers have a complicated relationship with the literary tradition, including the satiric tradition – one of desire for inclusion yet refusal to cooperate within a system that maintains strict generic boundaries, gender norms, and hierarchies.

I focus on novels and short stories by twentieth century women writers, specifically by Virginia Woolf, Stella Gibbons, Margaret Atwood, and Angela Carter – literary works coming from various genre and literary traditions – to show how they subvert the masculine literary tradition and exemplify strategies of the woman satirist. I have chosen to focus on the twentieth century novel because of its close relationship to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on satire and dialogism, theories that help us better understand the complexity of twentieth century satire. As Bakhtin describes in "Discourse in the Novel," the novel form allows for *heteroglossia*, or diversity in voice, subject and form. Therefore, the novel leaves space open for the blurring of different voices and boundaries between genres such as fantasy, realism, metafiction, prose, poetry, and so on. What better way, then, for women to transgress patriarchal norms, boundaries and literary conventions than to write satiric novels? With this understanding of the changing landscape of the twentieth century novel, in addition to Menippean satire being the form most popular during the twentieth century, I explore how this complex genre and its associations with dialogism goes hand-in-hand with twentieth century women's writing of satire.

Furthermore, just as critics of modern and postmodern satire argue for the significance of satire during the twentieth century, women writers' use of satire during the century correlates with postmodern theories of *l'écriture féminine* and other poststructuralist theories that focus on reversal, deconstruction, play and pleasure. Women's satire is distinct from the masculine tradition of satire because it embraces qualities connected to strategies of feminist writing such as a focus on subjectivity, ambiguity, revisioning, linguistic play, and lack of closure. In fact, according to George Test in *Satire: Spirit and Art* (1991), irony is used in satire *because* of the indirection and game playing it causes, and women satirists take advantage of irony and its ensuing ambiguity. This is in opposition to mid-century purists of classical satirical study, particularly the New Critics, who argue that satire comes from a conservative frame of mind, mocking that which goes against the status quo, and does so unambiguously using consistent rhetorical techniques.

In the following chapter I outline a brief history of satire and investigate the opposing theories in twentieth century criticism pertaining to its study. Two schools of thought emerged during the twentieth century: one school, supported by the New Critics, upheld classical understandings of satire as conservative and formalistic, while more recent studies focus on the radical, transformative, and complex qualities of the genre. Affected by the growing social movements of the 1960s and '70s, the second school appears during the latter half of the century and places focus back on the historical, social, and biographical contexts surrounding a work of satire in order to support satire's fundamental purpose as an instrument for social change. With the rise in Menippean

satire during the period, Mikhail Bakhtin's theories outlined in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* support a new perspective in the study of satire that embraces the intertextuality and dialogism found in women's satire. In addition, Bakhtin's theories closely relate to poststructuralist feminism's insistence on playing with established rules and speech patterns while breaking through boundaries that separate what have been traditionally viewed as distinct, immutable genre forms.

Chapter three, "Polyphonic Parodies: playing with gender and genre in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," explores in greater depth Bakhtin's dialogism in relation to the novel, Menippean satire and parody while using these ideas to support *Orlando* as a work of Menippean satire. Woolf is an important figure in the study of women's satire because she serves as a precursor to the kinds of satiric experimentation later twentieth century women satirists will undertake. Her experimental aesthetics merge with her desire for political and social change, and *Orlando* is a key parodic text that mocks the traditional biographies of 'Great Men.' Challenging the idea of the hero in biography and history, for example, Woolf satirizes patriarchal literary constructions and reframes the traditional ideals of chivalry, honor, patriotism, and gender separation, showing their complicity with fascism, war and oppression. Social conventions are parodied, exaggerated and deconstructed to show the constructedness and performativity of those facts and institutions perceived as 'truths,' including the classifications and distinctions of genre. In its preoccupation with ambiguity, Menippean satire becomes the perfect vehicle for Woolf to express her own ideas about androgyny, intertextuality and subjectivity.

Continuing analysis of Woolf as satirist, chapter four, “‘Dispersed Are We’: the serio-comic performance of Menippean carnival in *Between the Acts*,” examines how Woolf’s final novel may be understood as simultaneously serious and comic in light of Bakhtin’s work on the carnivalesque in the novel. Despite the humorous caricatures and mockery of nationalistic depictions of English history, *Between the Acts* is Woolf’s most serious, politically-charged novel, literally putting into play her political message from *Three Guineas* that stresses the intersections between nationalism, patriarchy, gender binaries and hierarchies, war, and the feelings of anxiety and alienation in 1930s England. In a similar fashion to that of *Orlando*, *Between the Acts* subverts the traditional understanding that only the histories and literature of ‘Great Men’ are the acceptable subjects of art and, instead, places focus on the villagers’ thoughts and dialogue and the commonplace as ‘real’ life. These interactions between the villagers are full of intertextual moments with fragmented allusions to English literature, thus contributing to the dialogic nature of the novel and emphasizing the diverse spirit of the English people.

Chapter five entitled “Confronting ‘Sheer Flapdoodle’: the equalizing force of middlebrow comedic satire and Stella Gibbons’ *Cold Comfort Farm*” offers an analysis of middlebrow fiction and how Stella Gibbon’s parodic satire overturns hegemonic hierarchies in genre study and formation. Despite Woolf’s disgust at the rise of middlebrow fiction during the 1930s and Gibbons’s mockery of highbrow elitism, both women share common critiques of the male-centered literary establishment. With a focus on Bakhtin’s theories pertaining to comedy and parody, chapter four illustrates how

Gibbons uses these characteristics of Menippean satire in order to create an egalitarian space that welcomes all readers, whether readers of low, middle, or high literature.

The final chapter of this study, “‘New Wine in Old Bottles’: feminist revisions and the fight for female subjectivity in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” examines Angela Carter’s fairy tales and Margaret Atwood’s feminist dystopia as revisionist imitations of the male tradition. These works challenge genre binaries separating reality from fantasy and self from other, also emphasizing women satirists’ distrust of narrative objectivity. Chapter five also makes connections between Menippean satire, parody, fantasy and postmodernism in relation to women’s satiric writing. Fantastical genres such as the fairy tale and dystopia have a long history of challenging literary realism with their exaggerated, magical depictions of society and universal experience. However, these genres also have a history of ignoring the voices and stories of women – stories that do not fit within the universal. Using first-person female narrators, these postmodern women satirist use devices of metafiction, including intertextuality and self-reflexivity, to make the act of composition explicit to the reader and allow the actualization of the narrators’ subjectivities. In doing so, the traditional narratives and genres on which the parodic revisions are based no longer remain part of a closed, seemingly objective system of classification.

CHAPTER II

TOWARD A THEORY OF WOMEN'S SATIRE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

When a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.

– Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Whenever an attempt is made at theorizing, or simply *defining*, satire as a clear-cut and immutable genre, it becomes apparent that such an attempt is futile – and this is not a bad thing. The sophistication and complexity of good satire means it defies simple definition, and this leaves the genre open to fascinating interpretations, diverse exemplifications, and dynamic constructions. While one critic will argue for the satiric nature of a novel, another critic will refute this classification; a novel might be most often read and analyzed as a sentimental novel, while other readers acknowledge the biting social commentary within the traditional plotline (Jane Austen's oeuvre is often used as a case in point). Unlike other genres such as poetry and drama that have a rich history of established patterns, forms, methodologies and subgenres within the broader forms, satire's seemingly never-ending malleability and contestable purpose allow it to sneak its way into other forms in a manner that no other genre seems to accomplish. In "The Definition of Satire: A Note on Method," Robert C. Elliott describes satire as an open concept in that the "set of necessary and sufficient properties by which one could define

the concept, and thus close it, are lacking” (22). Therefore, any set or ‘real’ definition of satire is an impossibility.

It is this ambiguity and dynamism that grants satire the unique position of being able to invade all other genres. Satire may be found in poetry, the novel, and drama, among other categories, and, depending on context, can easily shift between the tragic, the comedic, the horrific, and the humorous. Throw in the ambiguous issue of what differentiates ‘women’s writing’ from that of the masculine tradition and the exploration into what makes twentieth-century women’s satire unique seems near impossible. However, as I intend to show throughout this project, theories about women’s writing, particularly those theories related to feminist poststructuralism, coincide with a new understanding of all that twentieth-century satire entails.

As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, the only other genre that comes close to the ambiguity and diversity of satire is the novel, which is why this study will focus mostly on novels, along with a few short stories, to demonstrate how women satirists of the 20th century rely on satiric fiction as a means to challenge not only social and political institutions but the very literary traditions they use to make their cases. If the rhetorical aim or purpose of satire is either to formally mock that which is deemed wrong or offensive or to promote social change, which are the two distinctions most discussed among critics, then women writers have always been a literary presence within the genre. Despite this presence, the subject of women writers as satirists has been largely ignored, and it is my aim to save satire from traditional understandings and charges of its being a ‘man’s club’ that excludes women writers and promotes violent rhetoric. Regardless of Valentine

Cunningham's gendering of satire as masculine¹ and his claims that, traditionally speaking, satire is "a "malevolent, malignant art" whose "muse is rightly thought of as variously snarling, maculate, obscene, cankered, priapic, railing, raging, grotesque-making" and "aggressive" in its intent (429), women writers have employed satiric techniques that are far from abusive, phallic or moralizing. In contrast to traditional definitions of satire that focus on invective and conservative agendas, women satirists rely on playful wit, irony, ambiguity and parody to enter the cultural conversations in which they have often been silenced, blurring boundaries between genre forms and calling into question any rigid characteristics of both gender and genre.

In this chapter, I outline some of the core theoretical texts concerning satire in the 20th century and how they conflict with one another. Just as schools of thought change with the times, theories of satire shifted from a more traditional classical study to more radical contemporary approaches that call into question older, supposed 'stable' satiric systems and categorizations. Then I explain how Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, particularly in his work on Menippean satire and the novel, works as the cornerstone for understanding the connections between women's writing, feminist poststructuralism and 20th century satire. Each experimental novel explored in this project addresses Bakhtin's dialogism in some way, thus challenging the rigid constructs, hierarchies, hegemonies, and supposed stable 'realities' of the traditional literary canon.

¹ In Cunningham's words: "What writes these malignities is aggressive intent, which originates, evidently, in the satirist himself (usually a he)" (430).

Although a complete history of satire is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to consider the categories most often depicted in classical satiric theory. In its most general and traditional sense, satire is known as the use of certain linguistic and rhetorical moves (most often irony, parody, humor, exaggeration and other forms of wordplay) in order to expose and ridicule human foibles and vices. Considering satire in a broad sense of the term, Edward Rosenheim describes it as “consist[ing] of an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars” (323). For an overview of satire, this definition is most useful because it lacks the limitations and extreme attempts at categorization that so often appear in theories of satire – theories I will describe in more detail later in the chapter. Rosenheim argues for a more dynamic satiric spectrum, with one side leaning toward traditional polemic rhetoric with the purpose of persuasion or derision, and the other side consisting of the playful, comedic elements of satire. In the comedic end of the spectrum, objects of attack or ridicule are more generalized, without meaningful historic reality and with no significant particulars. What is also significant about Rosenheim’s definition is that it hints at the terms in which many scholars label these two ends of the satiric spectrum: Juvenalian and Horatian satire. Juvenalian satire, named after the Roman satirist Juvenal, is a formal verse-form of satire that works with invective in order to attack specific vices or follies. In its style and tone, Juvenalian satire takes a harsher approach in its censure of a particular object or trait. Horatian satire, on the other hand, takes a more genial approach toward the satiric target. Named after the Roman satirist Horace, Horatian satire is lighter and more humorous as it gently ridicules humanity. While Juvenalian satire is meant to make the reader cringe,

Horatian satire produces light-hearted laughter at the absurdities of mankind. These two categories of satire are generally viewed as the two main types, especially when considering ancient satire; however, as I will explain, Menippean satire, a complex kind of prose satire incorporating various subgenres, became the most popular form with the rise of the novel.

With its complexity, open-endedness, and deconstruction of norms, Menippean satire grew into the ideal vehicle for 20th century women writers of satire because, in its dynamism as a genre, Menippean satire not only calls into question the social norms it satirizes but that of genre forms as stable entities as well. Women writers of Menippean satire write along a spectrum, demonstrating a mix of righteous anger in their attacks on social, literary and political institutions while peppering their satire with both biting irony and playful humor. Each woman writer in this study, from the playful humor of Stella Gibbons to the frightening dystopia of Margaret Atwood, dances along the boundaries separating the different subgenres found within the literary, and more specifically the satiric, tradition.

In addition to categories of Horatian and Juvenalian satire, some theorists have created other distinctions among various kinds of satire. For example, Steven Weisenburger offers two models of satire: generative and degenerative. Generative satire is most in line with Juvenalian satire, and Weisenburger defines it as “a rhetoric of irony or ridicule used against exemplars of folly and vice, with an eye toward their correction, according to norms of ethical behavior and right thinking” (1-2). In contrast, the degenerative model, often found in Menippean satire, is “a means of exposing modalities

of terror and of *doing violence* to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror” (5). In relation to women’s satire and menippea, it is most helpful to consider the degenerative model because, as Dickson-Carr affirms, “Within the degenerative model, virtually all hegemonies are ridiculed, often through the use of appalling grotesqueries and exaggerations” (17). It is these “appalling grotesqueries and exaggerations” that offer the satirist the power of subversion, the freedom to undercut institutions that oppress. With that said, this study questions the assumption that progressive and transformative forms of satire must achieve social change by “doing violence;” women writers hold an ambivalent position because their desire for inclusion within literary culture and the ability to have agency within its tradition conflicts with their insistence that this same culture, if maintained as-is, oppresses and marginalizes the woman writer. The following chapters will examine how specific women writers of satire subvert hegemonies, often by depicting those power structures, including those of the Western literary tradition and male-dominated history, in exaggerated ways. Norms are taken to the extreme, made absurd to the point that they lose their power to dominate or oppress, while those long kept in the margins of history and tradition are allowed to flourish in the hands of the witty satirist, with her keen observations and rhetorical savvy.

Before women were able to take hold of the satiric tradition and make it their own, most studies of satire were limited to classic satirical works by men. Ancient satire was strictly male-centric, constructed into rigorous verse form and meant for the all-male agora. The Romans and Greeks fought for ownership of the origins of satire, and despite Quintilian having once stated that “satire is ours entirely” (Grube 302), there is still no

consensus as to who invented, nor who ‘got it right,’ when it comes to the establishment of satire as a clear and stable art form. This early struggle for satire anticipated the proliferation of satiric theory through the centuries as literary allegiances shifted back and forth. The writing of classical satire had its great revival in Britain during the Enlightenment as a form of social correction in the hope that, by raising awareness, satire would offer, in the words of Jill Twark, “a means of punishing the object...and eventually improve readers’ or spectators’ behavior” (14-15). It only makes sense that, during an age advancing the belief in the superiority of logic and reason, satire would become a popular genre used to attack those viewed as absurd, as well as social and political structures that tried to curtail individual freedoms. However, this revival in the satiric form continued to be male-centric and maintained the classical structure from antiquity, thereby further solidifying the genre as a stable, unambiguous entity with an explicit target and aim.²

Satire would yet again transform with the rise of the novel in the 18th century, a genre that, in its very nature, defies rigid formalistic rules and traditional understandings of literary structure. Interestingly, with the rise of prose satire and the novel also came the increase in the number of popular women writers. Women novelists embraced this transformation of satire within the framework of the novel, using classical satiric moves to advance their own agendas in fighting for equality and uncovering the nonsensical

² Of course, women were often the target of classical satire, particularly during the Enlightenment. Two of the ‘big players’ of Enlightenment satire, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, notoriously attacked the vices they saw as inherent in women of the time. Swift’s “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” and Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* serve as examples of male satirists mocking women’s vanity, with the latter further adding vices of ignorance, frivolity, affectation, and superficiality.

aspects of social norms. Still, scholars largely ignored these women until recent decades, and comprehensive studies of satire continue to mostly focus on classical examples of male satirists.

Despite the genre's continued popularity and its tradition of drawing attention to specific social injustices, the study of satire lost much of its power and urgency during the early-middle part of the twentieth century due to formalism's limited focus and movement away from the socio-political situations informing the creation of literary texts³. Formalist mid-century critics who discussed satire, including Northrop Frye and Alvin Kernan, often limited the transformative power of satire by ignoring the social situation and context in favor of looking at the text in-and-of-itself as a work of art.

Kernan insists in his 1959 "A Theory of Satire" that

we need to approach satire...as an art; that is, not a direct report of the poet's feelings and the literal incidents which aroused those feelings, but a construct of symbols – situations, scenes, characters, language – put together to express some particular vision of the world. (251)

In other words, it is not about the actual truth-telling ability of the satirist but his ability to make the reader *feel* his truthfulness through various stylistic techniques. Kernan refers to David Worcester's *Art of Satire* (1940), which describes the satirist as "a master of irony, caricature, disabling imagery, the unexpected thrust of wit, anticlimax, burlesque,

³ This is not to say that famous works of social satire did not exist during the early part of the 20th century. Oscar Wilde is an example of one who uses obvious farcical satire to ridicule social absurdities and institutions, thus challenging his own formalist philosophy of 'art for art's sake.' In addition, George Bernard Shaw's plays are full of satiric commentary concerning social norms and classism. But in comparison to the periods that precede and follow, the early 20th century encased its social criticism within its focus on artistic form over function.

and invective” (252). These are the stylistics included in satire that are worthy of study, and, according to Worcester, “no woman has ever made a mark in satire” (13).

While the characteristics Worcester and Kernan list certainly ring true for women’s satire, despite Worcester’s accusation, other characteristics Kernan upholds as standard for just about any work of satire do not fit so neatly into a feminist paradigm. For one, the women satirists I analyze understand the transformative power of language, and they remain hopeful that their representations of society can encourage change; they see the connections between self and other, authorial purpose and the real-world meaning as construed by the reader. Even in the context of the dystopian novel, Atwood suggests the possibility of change and rebirth, urging her readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to see the scary realities presented in the novel as exaggerations of present social actualities. As I will describe throughout this project, the wordplay and irony are clearly present in the text, but there is no doubt that those rhetorical strategies serve a purpose beyond themselves.

Counter to this more optimistic use of satire, Kernan explains the satirist’s pessimistic endeavor: “The satirist...sees little hope for reform unless violent methods are used to bring mankind to its senses,” and he “typically believes that there is no pattern of reason left in the world,” a negative effect of “the sheer idiocy of mankind” in a modern age (262). Women satirists have no choice but to believe that justice shall prevail, if only readers are given the opportunity to question assumptions and become aware of the ironic mix of silly absurdities and irrational oppressions. What do women writers have to lose? They certainly cannot rely on smug self-satisfaction at their witty

wordplay. Instead, they portray a society that is not one of “sheer idiocy” but of people blind to the injustice imbedded in their own traditions and institutions. Women satirists see this problematic, anxiety-ridden ‘modern age’ as a time ripe for satiric transgression, exposing readers to the limitations within the status quo and leaving the canon open for new literary traditions. And, ultimately, it takes a village to take down the old order. From Woolf’s attempts at building a community of women Outsiders to Gibbons’ intertextuality celebrating other forms of writing beyond masculine modernism and the avant-garde, from Atwood’s protagonist imagining her fellow woman reader to Carter’s reconstructions of fairytales that perpetuate anti-woman typologies such as the witch and the helpless maiden – women’s satire acknowledges the importance of not only a woman-centered text but a text that builds bridges between self and other, author and reader, woman and woman.

Unlike women satirists who present communities of women to enact change, Kernan supports an image of the lone individual satirist up against societal degeneration, “convinced that the fate of the world depends solely on him,” giving “rise to the heroic postures he frequently assumes” (263). The (depicted as male) satirist

is not so complex. He sees the world as a battleground between a definite, clearly understood good, which he represents, and an equally clear-cut evil. No ambiguities, no doubts about himself, no sense of mystery trouble him, and he retains always his monolithic certainty. (Kernan 264)

But what about women writers who acknowledge the complicated relationship they have with being a part of a literary tradition they are trying to subvert? In contrast to Kernan’s

stagnant traditionalist take on satire, women satirists play with the ambiguities and multiple truths and realities within society while focusing on the necessity of community efforts to make necessary changes. The protagonists in women's fiction such as Margaret Atwood's Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* are conflicted about their own complicity within the systems that oppress women. Those female characters ask questions more often than they supply easy answers. Kernan's clear distinction between good/evil, right/wrong in satire dissolves when women, pen in hand, take to satirizing hierarchies and women's struggles within patriarchal institutions.

Similar to Kernan's traditionalist take on satire, Northrop Frye famously describes it as clear and distinct, arguing that irony is made less ambiguous in satire as moral standards must be clear for satire to work (Frye 234). Like all traditional studies of satire, women's satirical moves are ignored in Frye's study. While Frye asserts that "All humor demands agreement that certain things, such as a picture of a wife beating her husband in a comic strip, are conventionally funny" (235), women satirists call into question the humor of said conventional image. They understand that, for the image to work as a piece of humor, the viewer must accept (and find funny) gendered understandings of violence. When Regina Barreca defends women against accusations of lacking a sense of humor, she makes the valid point that perhaps those modes of so-called 'humor' just aren't that funny. Despite Frye's attempt to situate humor in the land of universals, Barreca affirms the subjectivity of comedy: "Almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humor; age, race, ethnic background, and class are all significant factors in the production and reception of humor" (Barreca 12). Just as humor

is multitudinous and subjective, women's satire upholds ambiguities in language and meaning. I argue that it is this ambiguity and multiplicity in twentieth-century women's satire that accounts for so few studies dedicated to the topic; with such an expansive history of categorizing satire as strictly this or that, women's satire risks falling between the cracks of absolutism.

Written a year before Frye's "The Mythos of Winter," Elliott's "The Satirist and Society" (1956) struggles with these traditional understandings of satire, wavering back and forth between conservatism and radicalism. He writes:

the satirist claims, with much justification, to be a true conservative. Usually...he operates within the established framework of society, accepting its norms, appealing to reason (or to what his society accepts as rational) as the standard against which to judge the folly he sees. (Elliott 213)

He continues to describe satire as maintaining the status quo: "[The satirist] is the preserver of tradition – the true tradition from which there has been grievous falling away" (213). However, even Elliott must qualify his stance, admitting that "no matter how conservative the rationale of the satirist may be, it is inevitable that the pressure of his art will in some ways run athwart society's efforts to maintain its equilibrium" (214). The satirist is both inside and outside of society; therefore, he has "ambiguous power" that, if used correctly, can extend his attack on the particular into an attack on the larger structures of which the particular is a part. This ambiguity within satire is what gives it its "revolutionary" spirit (215).

Connery and Combe take this new revolutionary stance even further. Despite what traditionalist-formalists would see as a sign of aesthetic failure, Connery and Combe see a positive trend in twentieth-century satire toward open-endedness and irresolution. They support the formlessness of satire, which, thereby, allows satire to “inhabit the forms of other genres...and makes satire resistant to simplistic versions of a formalist approach” in that “the incongruity created by satire’s parasitic appropriation of other forms can create friction between form and content that runs counter to the prescriptions of formalism” (5). James English agrees, stating that the “real story” of satire during the twentieth-century

is not to be found in its most obvious or generically perfect instances but in its trans-generic, practically viral itinerary through the very bloodstream of the canon, including the work of the usual suspects...but also that of less easily classified writers...and many of the most compelling novelists of the new millennium. (857)

For English, and I would agree, the twentieth-century and the rise of the experimental novel laid the groundwork for writers to claim freedom of not only content but “hybridities” of genre form. More importantly, due to the shake-up of literary decency during the turn of the century with the rise of modernism, a “satiric disposition within the novel” arose and found more space in which to operate (English 857). With expansionism, industrialization, promises of the benefits of ‘modernization’ and ‘progress,’ and what Bergson referred to as the humor found within a mechanized

modernity⁴, satire reemerged once again as a favorite of disenchanted writers.

Cunningham attributes this resurgence of satire in the 20th century, especially the dystopian quality of this newer, fresher brand of satire, to the complicated history of the century. Confronted with multiple wars and the mechanization of which English and Bergson discuss, modernist writers depicted the anxiety and cynicism of modernity through satirical ridicule. Uncovering the power satire has to take over all genres, Cunningham claims that by “refusing all generic constraints,” satire “will get in everywhere,” “invading and infecting every brand of twentieth-century fiction: fictions comical and farcical...but also fictions essayistic, elegiac, Gothic erotic, domestic, historical, topographical, documentary, social- and socialist-realist, magic realist” (402).

Lisa Collette further explains this connection between dark humor, social satire, and the modern British novel: “though mechanical repetition and inelasticity may still be a source of humor, the focus of the comedy is now the rigid and mechanical ordering of society” (20). Importantly, Collette is making a point about the emerging cynicism toward social constructs and the dark absurdity of their continuation. She continues, challenging traditional views of satire’s conservatism: “the utility of laughter is no longer in correcting errant behavior but in offering human beings a pleasurable defense against forces that would reduce them to interchangeable mechanical parts in a vast machine” (20-1). Anxiety grew from the awareness of the mechanized behavior and restrictive

⁴ In his essay “Laughter,” Bergson describes laughter as a response to the recognition of the repetitive mechanization displayed by humans and its incongruity with the dynamism of life. Laughter serves the purpose, then, of assuaging the anxiety and feeling of alienation caused by the modern individual’s realization that he or she is confined within a system of constraint beyond his or her control.

performed roles within society, complicating simplistic understandings of history, identity, and other categorizations as intrinsically permanent or natural. As Judith Butler describes in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, society normalizes the repetition of social performance, but it is this repetition and the exaggeration of the performance that can uncover the cracks and fissures in the absolutism of a category – in Butler’s case, the category of gender (25). Out of the awareness of the mechanization of social roles came the perfect environment for satirists to challenge expected roles through ironic play and exaggeration, thus creating an atmosphere of resistance and subversion. And according to Collette, the “humorous refusal to adapt to societal expectations is a technique that women writers have long employed in resisting and subverting a dominant order that has left them at the margins...” (22).

Speaking of margins, we cannot ignore that women have been placed in the margins of literary history, too. Using generic conventions with a satiric edge, women writers of the twentieth-century were able to confront the dominant literary order, and the inclusiveness of new understandings of satire allow us to read for how women appropriate various genres in their quest to reinvent the literary tradition. As I will argue, this ability of satire to remain broad and appropriate other literary forms is exactly what makes satire the perfect medium for twentieth-century women writers to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo of the literary tradition as they take conventional forms and manipulate them to show the instability of generic ‘truths’ and primacies. Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* satirizes biographies and histories, genres traditionally dominated by men, creating a mock history of a highly ambiguous hero(ine).

Stella Gibbons simultaneously celebrates and mocks middlebrow fiction of the 1930s, but saves her most acerbic mockery for what she sees is the sexism, elitism, and absurdity of Modernism and the avant-garde. Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter take masculine traditions of dystopia and the fairytale by the horns, breaking generic conventions and transforming those genres into woman-centered texts. By satirically referencing other genres, women writers reinvent conventions, proving the malleability of (and often fallibility of maintaining) distinct categories and traditions.

Continuing with this move away from stagnant studies of satire, Patricia Spacks analyzes the transformative nature of satire and the satirist's desire for change or, at the very least, awareness. Using the theatre as her example, Spacks explains how satiric fiction can enact change: "The audience deprived of emotional fulfillment or catharsis...gains energy and impulse to change the society there depicted, to recognize the causes of its discontent, to take action against them" (363). She adds the communal element of this process when she continues to state that "its purposes are to some extent extra-literary, that its intent is to achieve on and through its readers some effect beyond immediate emotional impact, beyond insight, beyond the personal" (363). Spacks calls this "the satiric emotion" in that the satirist "usually seems to believe – at least to hope – that change is possible," and, in the view of the satirist, this "leads to social change; he insists that bad men make bad societies. He shows us ourselves and our world; he demands that we improve both. And he creates a kind of emotion which moves us toward the desire to change" (363).

For Spacks, the strongest satire is that which is left incomplete and ambiguous, where “the reader is left insecure, unanchored”:

The satirist does not give [the reader] any view of the universe which leads to exalted tragic or resigned comic acceptance. He depicts a universe full of unresolved problems. In the best satire he is likely to create level upon level of uneasiness; as our insight increases, we see ever more sharply our own involvement in tangles which it is our responsibility to unravel. In the most powerful satire, too, uneasiness plays constantly against complacency: we identify the victims as others and feel our superiority, only to find ourselves trapped a moment later, impaled by the scorn we have comfortably leveled against the rest of the world. (364)

Unfortunately, Spacks is still stuck in a masculinist framework of the satiric tradition, offering many examples of male writers who follow her description of strong satiric writing, including Evelyn Waugh, Amis, Kingsley, George Orwell, and Kurt Vonnegut. She fails to recognize the women writers who were in the process of making this ambiguous form of satire a central element of their feminist writing. I believe this blindness to women’s satire is specifically caused by the primary satiric target of many women writers: that of the literary forms themselves. Critics continue to focus on the depictions of society, and, certainly, the allowance of ambiguity is important within this criticism of social norms. But women satirists complicate this focus by demonstrating the interconnections between genre normativity and social normativity.

Most work in support of women’s satire has taken the form of studies in humor and laughter. Feminist theorists have refrained from supporting satire because they see it as part of the violent, oppressive male tradition, and, if we consider Kernan’s and Cunningham’s arguments about satire and their focus on violence and invective, this

conclusion has some validity. Connery and Combe refer to the lack of scholarship on feminist satire, stating that “feminist critics have most often referred to the power of women’s ‘humor’ – rather than satire – implying that satire is indeed gendered; the work of examining this distinction and of the many issues that underlie this difference has only just begun” (12). Regardless of whether a critic’s focus is on humor or satire, women do have a history of using humor to serve satiric purposes. This connection is important because recent studies have explained the potential for satire to be “a site of resistance to cultural and political hegemony,” as well as used to “unify marginalized or colonized people (Connery and Combe 11). These are the same justifications feminist critics have given in support of women’s humor in the past couple of decades. As Eileen Gillooly argues, humor and wordplay were tactics used by women writers to mask the serious aims of their works. She explains:

In cultures that mark aggressiveness as masculine and therefore as threatening in a woman, women, like other marginalized groups, often preferred wit, understatement, irony, and self-deprecation to derision and open aggression, thus minimizing the risk of challenging the status quo. (Kessel 12)

Satire has generally been a highly public form of protest, and women have been traditionally relegated to the confines of the private sphere. Thus, 20th century women writers, using their ‘available means’ of persuasion in a cultural climate unfriendly to the ‘mouthy woman,’ “turn understatement into lethal sharpness but, by emphasizing the absurd features of gender hierarchy and women’s exclusion, shield the blows of reality to

their heroines” (Kessel 16). In these cases of women’s writing, ambiguity and absurdity are cushioned by the acceptable form of the comical.

Not all theorists of satire agree with this understanding of ambiguity as an intrinsic part of 20th century satire, even when dealing with works that are notoriously postmodern and, thereby, often poststructuralist. Like the traditional critics of satire described earlier, Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit argues for clear distinctions between genres and literary elements such as irony and satire. She claims that irony works through ambiguity while satire “must be plain and clear...to make its point” (510). Furthermore, Pavlovskis-Petit takes the traditional approach that satire “demands conformity to a standard of behavior and a conviction that life will be improved if people do what is right – and there is no doubt that right and wrong can, and should be, clearly defined” (512). Satire, according to Pavlovskis-Petit, is a genre of “dictatorial authority,” and, similar to Kernan’s view, the satirist “makes a basic dissociation between his own superior character and behavior and those of others” (512). Yet again, however, the difference between men’s and women’s satire and ways of writing is ignored. Since only male writers are referred to, where does that leave the female satirist?

Melinda Rabb’s approach to satire contradicts that of Pavlovskis-Petit and is more appropriate here when considering women’s writing and satire. She supports a more ambiguous, dialogic approach to the study of satire:

But who can know the full import of a satirist’s complex ironies?...Irony is a secret-keeping mode of discourse; it signified something beyond the literal, but it does not explicitly reveal or confirm that other meaning. In fact, often *multiple* meanings are activated by irony, in the same way that secret histories activate

multiple versions of the same event or person. Because of its dependence on irony, satire is always withholding information, always teasing its readers with hidden possibilities, always suggesting a design or plot beyond, beneath, or behind appearances. (581)

For Rabb, twentieth century satire, especially when studied through the lens of poststructuralism, supports the playfulness and, in her words, “secrecy” of the satiric attack. Interestingly, despite satire typically being defined within a masculine tradition, Rabb reverses this understanding by associating satire with “gossipy and feminine qualities” that “create a sense of community” and give a “sense of shared experience in the special intimacy and camaraderie enabled by satiric discourse” (580). This feminization of satire allows for further exploration into how twentieth century satire, especially in the novel form, became such an important genre for women writers looking for a way to reinvent traditional literary models. Furthermore, Rabb implies satire’s reliance on irony as a literary device, challenging those who wish for strict boundaries between the two terms. Women satirists and other marginalized groups depend on irony’s doublings so that they can say that which cannot be said. In using irony and wordplay, they allow for the ambiguity inherent in the terms, giving them the freedom to play with ideas, prove their fallibility, and break the laws of the established order.

What these studies in satire have in common is the sense of the impossibility of formulating a distinct, finalized definition of satire – and this just might be the most significant contribution to the study and understanding of how satire works within a feminist framework. In recent additions to the study of satire, Dustin Griffin and George Test call out the exclusionary methods of traditional formalist approaches to defining

satire and call for a more inclusive and situational understanding of the genre. Griffin emphasizes the multi-genre appeal of satire for those who wish to challenge established literary norms. About the complexity and near impossibility of typecasting satire as a genre, Griffin claims that “the difficulty of comprehending satire within a single theoretical frame” is most pronounced in that “it can through parody invade *any* literary form: epic, pastoral, travel book, song, elegy, and so on. When satire takes over another literary structure, it tends not just to borrow it...but to subvert it” (3). Like irony, parody is a key device used by women satirists. Despite Audre Lorde’s famous statement, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” many women writers have used not only the master’s language but the master’s own literary works to challenge and overthrow the perceived superiority of canonized texts as well as the conventions they uphold. Women satirists take advantage of satire and the tradition in order to manipulate and subvert the very genres they employ in their works, and the experimentalism of the modernist/postmodernist twentieth century laid the foundations for women to play with language and established forms.

In addition, once critics moved away from the strict adherence to only studying form, they were able to consider the culture, experiences, and personal philosophies of the writer, thus further complicating the satiric attack. Just over the past forty years or so, critics have been “resituat[ing] satire in history” and “locat[ing] its origins in the interplay between the creative imagination of the satirist and his personal circumstances, and to focus on the character of the satirist’s appeal to his reader” (Griffin 29). What came to be is a satire that is not, in fact, a clear and unambiguous attack; all factors

contributing to a work of satire, especially prose satire, make for a more obscure and double-edged presentation.

For George Test, it is this pliability and ambiguity of satire that keeps the genre alive:

...since the forms and expressions of satire change from period to period, from society to society, there is no tradition of 'satire,' only of various types, some of which have had their day and then passed out of existence... Satire is therefore not autonomous, not the sum of its style, manner, or metaphors, or the language of its individual selections. (258)

Instead, satire is a collaboration of sorts between author, culture, and the texts that have come before. This understanding corresponds with Amy Devitt's theory of genre formation and how a community appropriates and manipulates existing traditions.

Devitt's work pertaining to genre theory supports these new understandings of how satire can effectively use (and abuse) texts. Her argument that, like specialized studies of satire, studies of genre have shifted from a formalist approach to a user-based approach is significant because she illustrates how genre theory should be defined not by static rules but "according to the people who participate in genres and make the forms meaningful" (3). According to Devitt, the use, as well as the *creation*, of genre is contextual, "interactive and reciprocal" (3), and is (re)constructed by tensions between the appropriation and rejection of genre conventions, and likewise individual uses and that of the community. In comparison to this more fluid and flexible way of looking at genre as a whole, women satirists may now be understood as using satire, as well as subgenres within satire, so as to simultaneously refer to commonly known genre conventions (what

Devitt refers to as “creative boundaries”) while bending those conventions in order to call into question the stability of classification as a whole, thereby also building a community of women writers of both individual and shared experience.

As theorists such as Devitt, Bakhtin, and Kristeva point out, all texts are intertextual, and women satirists make this relationship between self and other, text and other texts, and context and form more transparent in their works. Contrary to the belief of formalists, satire, like all genres, is created and recreated by the writers (and groups of writers) who use it, and those writers are products of their times. Traditionalist and formalist takes on satire ignore the social, political, and cultural conditions surrounding the artist – the very conditions that trigger the artist’s expression through linguistic play. It is this humorous playfulness, the use of puns, metaphor, and irony, not to mention the importance of allusions and parody, which become the weapons of the satiric artist. It is in the tradition of Menippean satire, the novel, and the carnivalesque as outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin that women writers of the twentieth century have flourished in their wry, tongue-in-cheek attacks on the hegemony of patriarchy and the literary canon. In line with other poststructuralists such as Kristeva, Derrida, and the difference feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Bakhtin’s interest lies in the linguistic play, ambiguity, and multiplicity associated with the rise of the novel and the subgenres often embedded within this young genre. Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to language goes hand in hand with his interest in the inherent possibilities for radicalism found within Menippean satire and the novel form as a whole.

Different from the earlier classical verse satire, Menippean satire moved beyond personal attacks to assail ideologies. Named after the Greek Cynic philosopher-satirist, Menippus, Menippean satire is a more complex narrative prose form that adopts various other genres such as fantasy, allegory, comedy, crude naturalism, and so on, most often in order to simultaneously parody those genres while ridiculing broader scale societal ills and normative attitudes. Although critics have traditionally focused on the conservative bend of satire, or its reinforcement of traditional social hierarchies, established truths, and social divisions, Menippean satire, as a narrative form of satire, tells a story so as to parody “both the official voice of established beliefs and the discourse of its opponents” (Palmeri 6). And in doing so, it “interrogates any claims to systematic understanding of the world” (Palmeri 6). Instead of the desire to maintain tradition and mock that which does not fit, Menippean satire “is...less tied to a conservative cultural project [than traditional verse satire] and potentially more subversive” (Palmeri 6). In *Menippean Satire Reconsidered*, Howard Weinbrot describes it as “a genre for serious people who see serious trouble and want to do something about it” (xi). In its expansiveness and open-endedness, it is “a kind of satire that uses at least two different languages, genres, tones, or cultural or historical periods to combat a false and threatening orthodoxy” (Weinbrot 6). It is this inclusiveness, as well as Menippean satire’s connection to the novel – a genre already embracing of women writers by the nineteenth century – that gave way for modern women satirists to invade the literary scene, ready to reinvent the very genres they use. Robin Mookerjee claims that Menippean satire “strips away public perception to expose an underlying reality, recognizable and gratifying to the reader” and

“makes no claim of telling truths, but reveals a different order of truth by chipping away at the ground of literature: the conventions and beliefs with which its practitioners begin” (18, 25). This certainly pertains to women’s satire as well, and women writers take great pleasure in using men’s texts while striking a few blows at their supremacy; however, instead of remaining objective or distanced in their presentations of others’ texts, women writers merge their own voices with the voices of others in order to simultaneously call into question the dominance of some voices over others while rejoicing at having the opportunity to join the community of writers as authorial subjects.

The term *Menippean* was popularized by Northrop Frye in his studies on satire, but the term acquired a wider, more revolutionary application with the publication of Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. While Frye found the term “cumbersome and in modern times rather misleading” (“The Four Forms of Prose Fiction” 86), preferring the term *anatomy*, Bakhtin sees this “cumbersome” quality as an opportunity for exploration and expansion of his ideas about dialogism, carnival, and the novel. From the beginning of his discussion of Menippean satire, Bakhtin explicitly connects it to the serio-comic and carnivalesque folklore. In opposition to the monological depiction of culture, high status, and heroic stance of the epic that upholds social norms and traditions, prose satire in the form of the novel “possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality” in that it transgresses the system (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 107). According to Bakhtin, Menippean satire, as a serio-comic form, “present[s] a challenge, open or covert, to literary and intellectual orthodoxy” (107). This objection to established truths is reflected in both the content and the form;

Menippean satire interrogates the intersections between established forms while playing with the boundaries between those forms by including multitudinous, diverse voices. This play has roots in carnival, with Menippean satire “[becoming] one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world, and remains so to the present day” (113).

With the carnival in mind, Bakhtin lists the various characteristics he associates with Menippean satire, beginning with its focus on comedic effect. In his description of the comic element within Menippean satire, Bakhtin describes the diversity and flexibility of the genre. Comedy, diversity and flexibility lend themselves to other characteristics such as its freedom from historical and realistic limitations, as well as literary conventions such as plot. Bakhtin asserts:

The most important characteristic of the menippea as a genre is the fact that its bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic and adventure is internally motivated, justified by and devoted to a purely ideational and philosophical end: the creation of *extraordinary situations* for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a *truth*.... (114)

Bakhtin sees the usefulness of the fantastic in serving not a plot but a philosophy, *testing* truths instead of promoting one truth as an absolute. Interestingly, while Bakhtin was formulating his theory at the height of modernism, much of this challenging of truths and convention mirrors the characteristics set forth by the postmodernists during the latter half of the twentieth century. With his focus on play, fantasy, intertextuality and the inclusion of low culture in the novel form, Bakhtin may easily be seen as an important

player in postmodern feminist theory, and his theoretical work on genre anticipates the writing of women novelists such as Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter.

Furthermore, like the postmoderns, Bakhtin describes the experimentalism of Menippean satire as including the psychological states of the characters, whether in depictions of madness, multiple personalities, or dreams – all indicators of the complexity of the human mind and multiplicity of the self. Although technically “modernist,” critics such as Pamela Caughie argue that Virginia Woolf’s novels may also be viewed through the lens of postmodernism, and all of these Menippean characteristics apply to her works as well. With multiple selves also come multiple meanings, which accounts for the dialogic nature of Menippean satire. Bakhtin’s term is *heteroglossia*, or the smash up of multiple competing discourses which creates diverse meanings and communicative acts of open-endedness. According to Bakhtin, *heteroglossia* is found most notably in the novel because of its ability to contain many diverse voices within a lengthy text. These diverse voices might include the author’s, various characters’, the narrator’s (or narrators’), inner monologues, outer dialogues, and so on. For the women writers in this study, the voices of past authors are also an important consideration, especially in regard to how women writers of the twentieth century appropriate and parody the works of male authors.

As Bakhtin states, within Menippean satire man “loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself” (117). Through dream sequences and other tricks of the mind, characters in novels have the ability to represent many things at once, thus pushing readers to see characters in many new ways,

and “this destruction of the wholeness and finalized quality of a man is facilitated by the appearance, in the menippea, of a dialogic relationship to one’s own self” (117). This focus on multiplicity and the dialogic coincides with the feminist theory of Luce Irigaray. Gail Schwab goes so far as to make the argument that Irigaray’s text is often misunderstood and written-off by American feminists because of this dialogism. Like Bakhtin’s concept of the social origin of language, Schwab explains Irigaray’s consternation at the absolutism and supposed objectivity assigned to the “hard” sciences: “In these sciences truth is considered solid and graspable, that is apolitical, non-gendered and impersonal, and facts are not spoken by anyone for anyone but ‘speak for (and by) themselves’ in a crystalline neutral medium” (Schwab 58). Irigaray refutes this perception of science because, as Schwab puts it, “Language cannot be cut loose from person, time, and place to float freely in some ideal, impersonal, non-time and non-place” (58). She continues: “What is important in this context is Irigaray’s insistence on articulating the contingent, social nature of her own language” (58). Schwab argues that this is in line with Bakhtin’s own thoughts about language and reality – that both are multitudinous and rely on social context and experience.

Irigaray’s own use of, and insistence on, contradictions and open-ended questions in her works further allow for enough ambiguity that the dialogue never ends; Irigaray and her reader are constantly reassessing words and their meanings, playing with double-entendre and metaphors connecting women’s bodies to writing. Similar to Bakhtin’s question in the never-ending toying with truths and established connections between words and meanings, Irigaray confronts the phallogocentric need for clear definitions and

labels. For example: in *This Sex Which is Not One*, she analyzes the inherent problems with the question “Are you a woman?” She explains, “So the question ‘Are *you* a woman?’ perhaps means that there is something ‘other.’ But this question can probably be raised only ‘on the man’s side’ and, if all discourse is masculine, it can be raised only in the form of a hint or suspicion” (121). She continues:

Of course, if I had answered: ‘My dear sir, how can you have such suspicions? It is perfectly clear that I am a woman.’ I should have fallen back into the discourse of a certain ‘truth’ and its power. And if I were claiming that what I am trying to articulate, in speech or writing, starts from the *certainty* that I am a woman, then I should be caught up once again within ‘phallographic’ discourse. I might well attempt to overturn it, but I should remain included within it. (121-2)

Irigaray’s only solution is much aligned with Bakhtin’s *menippea*: because she cannot very well “leap outside” masculine discourse, she must “situate [herself] at its borders” and “move continuously from the inside to the outside” (122). In other words, Irigaray acknowledges her need to use the master’s tools, but she will do so only as she continuously moves away from those tools, too. Like Menippean satire, the style of Irigaray’s ‘Womanspeak’ “resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept” (Irigaray 79).

Bakhtin’s description of the Menippea concurs with Irigaray’s attempts at breaking norms. Scandals, lapses in etiquette, including manners of speech, and other “inappropriate speeches and performances” are all a part of the genre (117). Bakhtin’s reasoning is that this sort of abnormal and disruptive behavior and speech liberate humans from predetermined behaviors that are generally established in genres such as the

epic. This same idea of disruption may be found in twentieth-century texts that use experimental language and form, including intertextuality, parody, self-consciousness/reference and the grotesque. Virginia Woolf takes advantage of the Menippea in her fantastical novel *Orlando*, mixing high culture with low, and shocking her reader with Orlando's sex change. Furthermore, Bakhtin illustrates other postmodern techniques such as that of "sharp contrasts" and "oxymoronic combinations;" "the Menippea loves to play with abrupt transitions and shifts, ups and downs, rises and falls, unexpected comings together of distant and disunited things, mésalliances of all sorts" (118). Woolf's tour de force has her reader romping through Elizabethan England with Orlando one minute, only to have the reader thrust into the seventeenth century for no apparent reason, not to mention several characters in the novel switch sex unexpectedly, thereby implying the constructedness and arbitrariness of one's sex and gender. Only personal experiences connected to society seem to dictate the sexual identity of Woolf's characters.

Along with Irigaray's *womanspeak* and its close alliance with Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism and carnival in Menippean satire, Hélène Cixous's theory of women's writing, *l'écriture féminine*, shares similarities with the two. Like Irigaray, Cixous refuses strict definitions or categorizations pertaining to women's ways of writing. In "Laugh of the Medusa," she declares:

It is important to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an importance that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the heliocentric system: it does and will take place in areas other

than those subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (883)

However, despite the inability to be pegged down or encaged, Cixous does offer detail of her understanding of *l'écriture féminine*. She writes:

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide: her writing also can only go on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours, daring these dizzying passages in other, fleeting and passionate dwellings within him, within the hims and hers whom she inhabits just long enough to watch them, as close as possible to the unconscious from the moment they arise.... (“Sorties” 88)

Thus, feminine writing is a passionate, free-flowing, “metaphorical wandering” kind of writing that lacks restrictive boundaries. She further adds qualities such as uneasiness and questioning, a privileging of voice, and wordplay. She affirms that women must “displace this ‘within’ [man’s discourse], explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in,” insisting that “it is not a question of appropriating their instruments, their concepts, their places for oneself or of wishing oneself in their position of mastery.... Not taking possession to internalize or manipulate but to shoot through and smash the walls” (95-6).

There is an emphasis in all of Cixous’ works that, through feminine writing, women will be able to upend binaries and create a space of mutuality. Although Cixous stands firm in her contention that women cannot simply appropriate masculine forms but must smash them to pieces, it is important to remember that Cixous herself often adopts masculine traditions and forms in order to subvert them. Her use of Medusa to illustrate

the negative depictions of women and men's misreadings of woman is a clear example of this. Cixous urges her reader to look at Medusa in a new light, to see her as not frightening but as laughing. It is this kind of reconfiguration of old traditions and myths that women writers, especially satirists, use to disrupt both gender *and* literary norms.

Other characteristics of Menippean satire worth mentioning in relation to the women satirists in the following chapters are the inclusion of utopian (or dystopian) elements, the parodying of multiple genres and established forms within a single work (this is most apparent in Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm*, but all of the novels parody traditional and/or popular genres of the time), and concerns with current issues (thus leading to the feelings of immediacy in the satire) and allusions to current events and popular culture. Furthermore, like the carnival from which Menippean satire sprung, it is an equalizing force, bringing together people of various causes and outlooks because, as Bakhtin mentions, the Menippea was formed "in marketplaces, on the streets and highroads, in taverns, in bathhouses, on the decks of ships.... Thus the genre of the menippea is perhaps the most adequate expression of the characteristics of the epoch" (119). Like the culture from whence it came, Menippean satire "simultaneously possesses great external plasticity and a remarkable capacity to absorb into itself kindred small genres, and to penetrate as a component element into other large genres," all-the-while unifying "the sacred with the profane" through literary carnival (Bakhtin 119, 123).

Similar to feminist demands of equality and liberty, the carnival in literature expresses the freedoms experienced during carnival as "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary...life are suspended" (122).

Included in these suspensions are hierarchical structures, forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette. The carnivalesque embraces profanation, blasphemy (both of which are clearly found in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as an act of defiance), "carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body," and "carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings..." (123). And all of these are done in order to unify the public through, paradoxically, the simultaneity of dualisms that unsettle binaries of either/or. For example: the parody within carnival is both mocking and celebratory. As Bakhtin maintains, "Parody here was not, of course, a naked rejection of the parodied object" (127). This understanding of parody can be seen in works such as Gibbon's *Cold Comfort Farm*: while Gibbons pokes fun at the popular rural middlebrow novels of the 1930s, she does so in good humor. She also references Jane Austen with much adoration, even when caricaturing the typical Austen heroine.

Continuing with the carnival, it is important to note that eccentricity is favored over the easily understood and the generally accepted as "life [is] drawn out of its usual rut" (Bakhtin 126). Ultimately, carnival is for the people, by the people – a time when people can switch places and play with role-reversals, allowing for marginalized groups to participate in ways they cannot in ordinary life. Heroes are debased, paupers are made kings, and the people are united; community is celebrated while hegemony is broken down. The "great function of carnivalization in the history of literature," including its use in Menippean satire, is that it "constantly assisted in the destruction of all barriers between genres, between self-enclosed systems of thought, between various styles, etc.; it destroyed any attempt on the part of genres and styles to isolate themselves or ignore one

another; it brought closer what was distant and united what had been sundered” (135).

Bakhtin continues his discussion of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*:

[The carnivalesque] is past millennia’s way of sensing the world as one great communal performance. This sense of the world, liberating one from fear, bringing one person maximally close to another (everything is drawn into the zone of free familiar contact), with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order. (160)

But, as Terry Eagleton asserts:

Carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. (148)

While this is true to an extent, it is important to acknowledge carnival’s effectiveness despite Eagleton’s claim. Although licensed, carnival is a playful rebellion that equalizes the participants in a society that usually restricts this rebelliousness. Therefore, this communal act of transgression could not occur without some kind of licensing in the ‘real world,’ and yet the use of carnival in the novel (a licensed but complicated form) allows the continuation of the transgressiveness of carnivalistic-parodic imagery.

For Kristeva, Bakhtin’s theory is subversive because of the playfulness of the carnivalesque as a metaphor for the freedom and diversity found in the novel:

“Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest” (36). Bakhtin’s

theory of dialogism shows that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 37). Kristeva agrees with Bakhtin that the modern novel of the twentieth century, with its incorporation of the carnivalesque and the polyphonic, and also full of contradiction, imitation and parody, is the only genre that allows for such a profound ambivalence in language. Just as Bakhtin argues, Kristeva reasserts that dialogism in the novel works because of the novel’s ability to have multiple narrators, characters and points of view. In Menippean satire, “The word has no fear of incriminating itself. It becomes free from presupposed ‘values;’ without distinguishing between virtue and vice” (Kristeva 53). It is the ambivalence of dialogism that makes it so that language and meaning cannot be tied down or forced into a patriarchal paradigm of either/or, which is why experimental fiction and satire have become the most significant forms for women writers of the twentieth-century.

This discussion of dialogism leads back to women’s use of these techniques in their own writing and what characteristics we can attribute to women’s ways of writing and satire. Several of the traditional views of satire have categorized satire within a violent framework of invective, judgment, and the crushing of that which does not fit within the viewpoint of the satiric author. Women satirists, on the other hand, often rely on humor, irony and parody as their primary literary weapons because they allow satirists to slyly counter the status quo. Laughter, unlike violence, promotes dialogue instead of killing it. For women satirists, it is through this playful dialogism that change may occur. In addition, women put their own mark on the Menippea in that they do not only represent a mix of low culture and high culture. Instead, women writers often focus on

the seemingly trivial and commonplace, sometimes, such as in the case of Angela Carter, elevating the trivial through the use of the fantastical. Historically, women have been relegated to the private sphere – a space deemed unimportant in masculine culture. Women writers have created their own tradition of using their “available means,” and one way to reach beyond the present is to re-imagine those common spaces and experiences that could affect the future.

In the poststructuralist sense of play, or *jouissance*, women satirists depend on manipulations of language, using wordplay and shocking metaphors in order to disrupt readers’ expectations when confronted with their satiric imagery, while at the same time thoroughly enjoying themselves and their freedom of play. For Bakhtin, carnival as a form of parody, is a space for rebirth – the destruction of seemingly stable, traditional structures. I argue that women writers of satire rely on these notions of parody and carnival within Menippean satire to disrupt the traditional structure of genre, keeping the text open-ended in its dialogism. Particularly during the twentieth century when intertextuality was all the rage, women satirists reference both literary and popular texts, blending high and low culture to subvert categorizations that place one above another. In the following chapters, I analyze how women writers use satirical methods to challenge the established literary canon that has traditionally kept women at the margins. These women writers show how, through a proliferation of intertextuality, genres and truths are complicated, and communities are created.

With a focus on Virginia Woolf’s fantastic mock-biography, *Orlando*, the following chapter begins the analysis necessary for a deeper understanding of how

women satirists engage the techniques associated with Menippean satire. By taking the biographic form and twisting it into an outlandishly fictional piece full of exaggeration, tongue-in-cheek irony, and outlandish fancy, Woolf ridicules those who believe that biographies must be 'fact' and 'truth' about the 'Great Men' of history. Ultimately, as a work of satire, *Orlando* deconstructs the myth of the lone male hero and brings to light the absurdity of gender binaries and the social constructions that support inequality through the use of dialogism and parody, including constructions of genre as a stable and closed system.

CHAPTER III

POLYPHONIC PARODIES: PLAYING WITH GENDER AND GENRE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*

It is all an illusion (which is nothing against it, for illusions are the most valuable and necessary of all things, and she who can create one is among the world's greatest benefactors), but as it is notorious that illusions are shattered by conflict with reality, so no real happiness, no real wit, no real profundity are tolerated where the illusion prevails.

– Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

In his essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin regards the novel, and the novelization of other genres, as the consummate manifestation of the dialogic in literature. He suggests that the novel form's diversity of voice, as well as the novel's lengthy exploration of these multitudinous voices, allows for never-ending interpretation and meaning-making. These diverse voices not only include the usual suspects of multiple characters and narrator(s), but also the various voices of the author, the reader, and of the past through intertextual reference. When various literary forms are novelized, Bakhtin states:

they become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the ‘novelistic layers’ of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (*Dialogic Imagination* 7)

What dialogism and novelization contribute to traditional literature is the playful breaking of myth and absolutism. With the inclusiveness that Bakhtin is suggesting here, hierarchies, closed-off boundaries, and static identities and truths are shown to be an illusion. Images of the hero, ‘Great Men’ of history, and the isolated genius-artist are myths carried down in Western tradition, and it is the dialogic novel that has the power to disrupt this very tradition and its myths.

Furthermore, in contrast with the epic form, the novel, in its dialogism and hybridity of literary styles, complicates hierarchies found in traditional literary forms. That which was held high in the epic is “brought low” and “contemporized” when toyed with in the novel, taken down from its pedestal and placed on equal footing with the ordinary (21). This demythification and contemporization contribute to the satiric underpinnings in the Menippean form. And the focus on layering, open-endedness, irony, and the playfulness inherent in these characteristics connects the ideas of dialogism and satire in the twentieth century novel.

Virginia Woolf, now often regarded as one of the most influential and important novelists of the twentieth century, certainly exemplifies Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogism, play, and ambiguity within the novel form, especially in relation to Menippean satire, and the mock biography, *Orlando*, is one of her most playfully satirical works in the Menippean sense. Despite past charges of Bloomsbury snobbery and apoliticism, recent studies have uncovered how Woolf’s experimental techniques are more than simply a display of the modernist aesthetics fashionable of her time. Alex Zwerdling, for example, successfully shows how Woolf was anything but apolitical, zeroing in on her

relationship to the 'real world' outside of the mind. He emphasizes her interest in the links between society and the individual: "...in almost everything she wrote, Woolf demonstrated her concern with the ways in which private and public life are linked" (5). And as second-wave feminists famously declared, the personal *is* political; Woolf deftly examines the intersections between the private mind of the individual, the private sphere of the domestic, and the public issues of society, nation, and culture. Woolf's style, particularly her satiric use of parody in her more playful works like *Orlando*, is inextricably linked to her feminism, the focus on the individual within a community and the political implications therein.

According to Bakhtin, parody is the most concrete form of the dialogic, stating that, in parody:

The intentions of the representing discourse are at odds with the intentions of the represented discourse; they fight against them, they depict a real world of objects not by using the represented language as a productive point of view, but rather by using it as an exposé to destroy the represented language. (*Dialogic Imagination* 364)

Parodying past works and ideas are dialogic in that it is not simply a criticism of the original but a display of intertextualism, a dialogue between texts that acknowledges the influence of the past while opening it up for new meanings and interpretations. Language and meaning-making move beyond the unified or individual and into the multitudinous and the social, where one's consciousness is not static but open to change that is dependent on social context. And, as Linda Hutcheon explains, regardless of critics' attempts to argue for a clear distinction between parody and satire, it is more useful to

accept that the two genres are most often used together (43). Parody, as dialogue, has the ability to mock established norms in numerous ways because it “has a stronger bitextual determination than does simple quotation or even allusion” in that “it partakes of both the code of a particular text parodied, and also of the parodic generic code in general,” stressing the difference between the two, or “textual differentiation” (Hutcheon 42). Furthermore, irony and parody often go hand-in-hand in the Menippean satirical novel as critical irony also problematizes that which is presented as a ‘given.’ As Bakhtin notes, “the object is broken apart, laid bare (it’s hierarchical ornamentation is removed): the naked object is ridiculous; its ‘empty’ clothing...is also ridiculous. What takes place is a comical operation of dismemberment” (*Dialogic Imagination* 23-4). Menippean satire depends on techniques such as parody and irony as a means of implying multiple, ambiguous meanings and providing a revision to that which is generally accepted. In the hands of women writers, parody becomes the primary tool used by women satirists to exploit these givens that have been established in a literary tradition dominated by men.

Like other twentieth century women writers of satire, parody became Woolf’s weapon of choice in fighting the oppressive boundaries placed by patriarchy; it became a way to critique and reshape the existing tradition while allowing her, as a woman, access to that tradition, all the while acknowledging its influence on her own writing. Woolf’s sly use of parody and other playful satiric techniques such as irony, caricature, role-reversal, and tongue-in-cheek humor maintain a sense of ambiguity important to Woolf’s beliefs in the multiplicity, open-endedness and complexity of life. To espouse

didacticism would be to lump herself into that very same dominating, patriarchal literary tradition in which she critiqued.

The novel on which I focus for this chapter, *Orlando*, is especially notable as a long work of dialogic, parodic satire that takes its comedy very seriously. The novel explores established literary traditions and constructions of history, playing with the idea that absolutes and the belief in the unified self are only illusions serving patriarchal institutions that keep hierarchies (and women) in their place. *Orlando* not only satirizes patriarchy and societal norms but, more specifically, the ways in which patriarchy and normativity construct (and constrict) genre. Throughout the novel, Woolf disrupts audience's expectations and mocks literary hierarchies and a canon that has historically excluded women and that which was seen as trivial (read 'feminine'). She challenges the "Great Men" of history and literature, focusing her attention on that which is often ignored – women, minor characters, the mundane in social situations, and the domestic sphere.

The purpose of Woolf's parody in *Orlando* is to demonstrate the ambiguities and dynamism present in constructions, whether those constructions are categories of gender or those associated with various narrative conventions such as history, biography and fiction – conventions Woolf associated with war, oppression, dominance and fascism. What is ultimately satirized is not that which is satirized in traditional satire, such as specific historical or literary people, but how these are often composed and constructed to the point that their constructedness becomes invisible and, therefore, 'truth.' Woolf's goal is to make these visible to her reader as not absolute 'truths' but social ideologies

contingent on time and place. As Pamela Caughie explains, by using elements found in satire such as exaggeration and parody, Woolf's works "affirm art as dramatizing the pageant of life, not as representing some stable reality distinct from the narrative and dramatic structures that enclose it" (84). As I will show, these constructions that demand strict binaries are often created in a way that further subjugates women into the margins of both society and the literary tradition. By using such satirical techniques as parody and those affiliated with it such as irony, pastiche, caricature, and role reversal, Woolf illustrates that these artificial constructs are not only oppressive, unrealistic and arbitrary but downright ridiculous. And these comedic, satirical techniques are, in fact, serious business.

Woolf did not begin *Orlando* with a sense of seriousness in purpose. In fact, she described both *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* as holidays, amusements, or breaks from her more serious, overtly modernist writing. On March 14th, 1927, Woolf writes in her diary of her brainstorming a new novel – the novel that would become *Orlando*. She describes her desire to write "a Defoe narrative for fun," with satire being "the main note – satire and wildness" (*A Writer's Diary* 104). Nothing was safe, including herself, as she declares, "My own lyric vein is to be satirized. Everything mocked" for a fun, light

escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels and be off... I think this will be great fun to write; and it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work [what would become *The Waves*] which I want to come next. (104)

Woolf later refers to *Orlando* as “a most amusing book,” and she outlines her plans for including all of her friends in the novel, especially her lover, Vita Sackville-West (112). Meant to “pacify” herself, she “abandoned” herself to “the pure delight of this farce,” this “joke,” intending to find the balance between truth and fantasy, between old genre forms and new (115-6).

However, by the time she had completed the novel, Woolf had begun to doubt her “writer’s holiday,” expressing her concern that, although it started as a joke, it had become “rather too long for my liking. It may fall between stools, be too long for a joke, and too frivolous for a serious book” (122). She finally labels *Orlando* “a freak,” despite her husband’s approval of its satiric qualities. Woolf writes:

L[eonard] takes *Orlando* more seriously than I had expected. Thinks it in some ways better than the *Lighthouse*: about more interesting things, and with more attachment to life and larger. The truth is I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously. Hence it lacks some unity. He says it is very original. Anyhow I’m glad to be quit this time of writing ‘a novel’; and hope never to be accused of it again. (125-6)

The ending of the novel does push it into a more serious, stream of consciousness style of writing typical of her other distinctly modernist works, completely different from the biographer’s attempts at objectivity at the beginning of the book, but the overall feel of the novel is very much in line with the traditional novel. The plot, although fantastical, is straightforward and linear, the statements and thoughts are clearly attributed to specific characters, and the romantic themes and tropes are quite conventional in some ways.

What is interesting about Woolf's assessment of *Orlando* as a novel is that she clearly expresses her assumptions about the novel as a genre in general, as well as the assumptions the public will make of it as more obviously in line with nineteenth and early twentieth century understandings of the typical episodic plot and distinct speaking voices of the novel. *Orlando*, like the traditional novel, has a plot similar to that of the picaresque novel with its distinct episodes and focus on the adventures of a protagonist-hero. The language and transitions are clear, the characters understandable and relatable to other novels, and Woolf's readers follow the growth of the young Orlando into adulthood in the same way one would typically read a *Bildungsroman*, or *Künstlerroman* if one focuses on Orlando's growth as a writer. All of these characteristics of Woolf's "frivolous" book are those she had fought so hard against.

In an essay composed in the same year as her early brainstorming for *Orlando*, "The Art of Fiction," Woolf urges both critics and novelists to embrace new ways of writing fiction that refuse to follow the prescribed conventions often demonstrated in the novel, to "cut adrift from the eternal tea-table and the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure" (125). Tongue in cheek, she continues with a warning: "But then the story might wobble; the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel, in short, might become a work of art" (125). For Woolf, it is the exploding of genre conventions and readerly expectations that create a "work of art." Even more frustrating, although humorously so, because *Orlando* included "a biography" on the title page, the novel was wrongfully lumped with the actual biographies of – you guessed it – the 'Great Men' of

history on the biography shelf. What this meant for Woolf at the time was a smaller readership and, therefore, less profit – “a high price to pay for the fun of calling it a biography,” Woolf writes (*A Writer’s Diary* 130). Perhaps it was these misreadings by the public that furthered her second guessing of her playful “writer’s holiday,” leading her to believe that she “did not try to explore” but instead “learned how to write a direct sentence” and “how to keep the realities at bay” while embracing the “impulse” to have “fun” and “fantasy” while “giv[ing] things their caricature value” (134). Regardless of her feelings about this odd book of hers, *Orlando*, like Woolf’s other works, is concerned with reality and exploration, and much of this exploration happens through the exaggerations she produces for satiric effect.

Despite these reservations about *Orlando* and the novel, Woolf began to think about the newness and openness of the novel form. In her 1929 essay “Phases of Fiction,” she writes that perhaps prose fiction is “the instrument best fitted to the complexity and difficulty of modern life. And prose...is still so youthful that we scarcely know what powers it may hold concealed within it,” and therefore “it is possible that the novel in time to come may differ as widely from the novel of Tolstoy and Jane Austen as the poetry of Browning and Byron differs from the poetry of Lydgate and Spenser” (145). We can hear the obvious parallels between Woolf’s view of the novel and Bakhtin’s. In its looseness and newness, the novel is still pliable and complex enough to grow as a genre as various writers use it, ‘abuse’ it, and make it their own. Woolf’s final novel, *Between the Acts*, will also show how she embraced the idea of the generative powers of

the novel as a form, even more so than with *Orlando*, in that she deliberately embeds her novel with other genres, both high and low, such as poetry, drama and nursery rhymes.

But first, let's focus our attention on the parodic satire of Woolf's magical 'biography,' *Orlando*. As a parodic, satirical novel, *Orlando* is, ultimately, a criticism of the traditional biography as an upholder of histories of 'Great Men' falsely deemed 'objective' and 'true' and an exploration of what happens when the conventions of biography do not hold. The daughter of the quintessential 'Eminent Victorian' Sir Leslie Stephen, the young Virginia Stephen was intimately aware of both the expected gender distinctions between her two parents and the respected 'officiality' of her father's master work on the lives of 'Great Men,' *The Dictionary of National Biography*. While her father did give her full rein of his vast library, Virginia was still affected by the oppressive atmosphere surrounding her father. Subjugated to the trivialities of the drawing room and "tea table" training, as Woolf has described it in "A Sketch of the Past," she began noticing the details in the mundane, all the while growing critical of the possibilities offered to her brothers and not to herself and her sister.

Acknowledging the fourteen year age difference between her parents, as well as her mother's participation in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, Woolf also grew aware of how social norms change with the times, writing that "Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate: the Victorian age; and the Edwardian age" (*Moments of Being* 126). Just as Virginia's father was the quintessential Victorian patriarch, her mother was the ideal 'angel in the house.' According to Woolf, her mother's role in the home was to placate her father and keep everyone happy. She

famously portrays this relationship in *To The Lighthouse*, and these memories of the oppression she felt living in a home full of division and gendered expectations were a stifling presence until the completion of the novel. Upon thinking of her father's death and how her life would have gone differently had he lived longer, she records in her diary on the day that would have been his 96th birthday: "His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; –inconceivable" (135).

Orlando serves as a challenge to both the gender and genre constructions upheld by her father. The 'Great (dead) Men' of history, the descriptions of supposed objective fact that simplify the complexities of an individual's life, the 'manly' endeavors of the hero-subject – all of these masculine qualities of biography and history are thrown aside for fantastical descriptions of a minor character's subjective experiences and highly unconventional lifestyle as 'he' becomes a 'she' and thinks instead of does. In her essays specifically dedicated to her theories on biography, "The New Biography" (1927) and "The Art of Biography" (1939), Woolf presents a new way of thinking about biography and its purpose, proposing that biographers should be open to discussing the lives of the obscure and less concerned with attempting to construct narratives of objective reality. Although biographers work with 'facts,' she argues, they should not be restricted to those facts; instead, biographers should combine these facts with imagination, or truths with personality:

if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff

one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (“The New Biography” 93)

In *Orlando*, the biographer explains this relationship between fact and imagination, writing that “Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous...nature, who delights in muddle and mystery” (58). It is memory, or imagination, “the seamstress” that “runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither,” who connects these “disconnected fragments” (*Orlando* 58). Anna Snaith contends that the rethinking of biography as a problematic and ambiguous genre is crucial to Woolf’s feminism, saying that “Her redressing of patriarchal dominance was intimately linked to generic, stylistic, and conceptual revision. She felt that...a written account of life may have a somewhat looser and more complex relationship to the life it is representing” (129). Snaith continues with Woolf’s idea of a new form of biography when she alludes to the importance of blending what is perceived as ‘truth’ with the personal: “Fiction may play a part in that representation” and “Woolf strains against the restrictions of the genre, longing to mix accuracy with imagination” (129). When composing *Orlando*, Woolf wrote a letter explaining how she intended to “revolutionise biography in a night” (*Letters III* 429). Although perhaps not in a night, the fantasy-biography hybrid of *Orlando* performs exactly what the author had intended through its playful parodies of the ‘old’ biography, blending of genres, and its central theme of androgyny.

Before the narrative has even begun, Woolf's hilarious preface parodies the typical scholarly style of a biographer's preface that name-drops and harps on about the many useful tidbits of knowledge gained from this illustrious person and that, those generally enlisted to add credibility to the work. The irony of this humorous mock-preface will further come to light once the reader has found that the biography does not actually *need* any of these seemingly useful facts. From Mr. C. P. Sanger, "without whose knowledge of the law of real property this book could never have been written" to Mr. Arthur Waley's knowledge of Chinese and Lord Berners, "whose knowledge of Elizabethan music has proved invaluable," the preface rattles out name after name, but as Woolf humorously concludes, "the list threatens to grow too long and is already far too distinguished" (5-6). None of this knowledge is ever referenced in Orlando's narrative, and surely, Orlando's story could have been told without these unnecessary details because imagination has filled in the gaps – a much needed imagination considering the magical details of Orlando's life. As Jane de Gay stresses, the collection of facts supplied throughout the novel in the form of the preface, index, and footnotes is nothing but a "mock scholarly apparatus...all of which are shown to be inadequate frameworks for addressing the complex subject-matter of a character who lives for 350 years and changes sexes part-way through" (132). She concludes that this joke preface demonstrates "ironic disdain for the weight of tradition" (132). Certainly, with the style and content of the typical preface and the cliché of signing off with the abbreviation "V.W.," Woolf has already made her reader aware of the ridiculousness of these well-known conventions.

Questions of veracity further arise when Woolf, tongue in cheek, includes Leonard Woolf's help with the research, "to which these pages owe whatever degree of accuracy they may attain" (6) – an obvious jab at the obsession of 'truthfulness' and 'facts' in the old, traditional style of biography, and a joke at the obvious *inaccuracy* of Woolf's fantasy. But the most humorous jab is saved for Woolf's critics, represented by "a gentleman in America" whom she would thank but has "lost his name and address," for he so "generously and gratuitously corrected the punctuation, the botany, the entomology, the geography, and the chronology of previous works of mine and will, I hope, not spare his services on the present occasion" (6). Again, through parody and verbal irony, Woolf playfully acknowledges and pokes fun at the focus on 'correctness' and the 'truthfulness' of the descriptions presented in traditional biographies, as well as her critics' preoccupation with her use of facts instead of the bigger picture: the life and subjective experience of the central character, Orlando.

From the outset of the narrative, all knowledge and facts given to the reader about Orlando are called into question: "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it..." (11). In denying the ambiguity of Orlando's sex and calling Orlando a "he" instead of by name, the reader's attention, ironically, is drawn immediately to Orlando's sex, how it factors into the introduction to his character, and whether or not the stability of Orlando's sex can, in fact, go unquestioned. The biographer continues in the common vein of fact-giving, puffery and machoism, describing the *in medias res* action of Orlando "slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters," a head that had been struck "from the shoulders of a vast

Pagan” in Africa by Orlando’s father, “or perhaps his grandfather” (11). Orlando “cut the cord so that the skull bumped on the floor and he had to string it up again, fastening it with some chivalry almost out of reach so that his enemy grinned at him through shrunk, black lips triumphantly” (11). Here, Woolf is already making connections between patriarchal ancestry, imperialism, and violence, themes she will further explore in her long essay *Three Guineas*. In addition to these themes, Celia R. Caputi points out that the reference to a Moor would trigger memories in Woolf’s reader of the most famous Moor in literature, Shakespeare’s Othello. Immediately the reader’s attention is placed on literary tales, implying that this will be less a story about a real historical person and more about the story of the English literary tradition.

Ironically, while most biographies include specifics, Orlando’s biographer waxes on about his opinions, ignoring the lack of precision as to who exactly cut the head from the Moor. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. What matters is the focus on the male tradition and inheritance of dominance, ‘chivalry’ and heroism. For now, with this focus, the biographer is thrilled to be telling the story of such a noble young man: “Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!” (12). But there is something a little ridiculous and comical about the satirical image of our young hero whacking away at a dead man’s head. Bakhtin explains this connection between humor and the demythification of epic conventions, including the high status of the hero:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject

cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it...Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 23)

And, in the spirit of Bakhtin's observations, there is no doubt that our hero, at this point in his development, is quite laughable and familiarized. In *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, Judy Little further reveals the significance of making the hero comical, especially for a writer like Woolf: "When Virginia Woolf...moves subtly against 'established values,' she moves against some of the most deeply established ones. She mocks the male hero even in his traditionally sacred archetypal landscape" (7). The result is that, "by so doing, she mocks the male-imagined pattern of the 'hero with a thousand faces'" or "the norm of the mono-myth" (7). Woolf has problematized our laughable hero to the point that he can no longer stand as the symbol for all that is heroic, which also leads the reader to question the idea of heroism as a whole.

Differing from her modernist peers, particularly James Joyce, Woolf does not look back to traditional western myths and form as a way to unify twentieth-century literature. As Little affirms, "In an age whose major male writers found in traditional western myths some 'form' that could hold twentieth-century literature together, *Orlando* mocks, and plays with, that very idea" ("(En)gendering Laughter" 189). In other words, *Orlando* scoffs at the very idea that unity or universality exists or is needed at all,

especially when women have been historically excluded from the so-called ‘universal.’ According to Little, “these [traditional western] scripts include the myth of the ‘universality’ and value of the male’s quest, and the myth of the ultimate nature of gender distinctions. *Orlando*, by contrast, mocks these gender-gods and other such presumptuous symbol systems” (189). As Bakhtin and Little argue, it is comedy that has the power to deconstruct these myths, such as male-centric heroism, that valorize gender distinctions and traditional power structures, thus making that which is held as sacred vulnerable for attack in a work of satire. While this mockery gets a laugh from the reader, our poor biographer certainly has his work cut out for him¹. Orlando is anything but the heroic type, and the biographer is inexperienced in the ways of working with such an amorphous character.

In contrast to the traditional depictions of the masculine aristocratic hero of action, Orlando’s biographer becomes distracted by his subject’s physical appearance. Despite having just stated that a biographer “Never need...vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet” for a subject as perfectly suited for the facts of biography as Orlando because “From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach what ever seat it may be that is the height of

¹ I tend to agree with Maria DiBattista that Orlando’s biographer is meant to be a ‘he,’ at least for the first half of the novel since the biographer’s tone changes closer to the end to reflect the changes in our protagonist. In the introduction to the annotated text of *Orlando*, DiBattista comments on the biographer’s “often perplexed” attitude toward Orlando and his/her inability to be a typical biographical subject (lii-liii). There are many moments when the biographer insists on a particular truth or interjects in order to “head off trouble,” particularly moments dealing with Orlando’s sex change and other gendered transgressions such as cross-dressing (liii). However, it could also be argued that Orlando’s biographer is as androgynous as Orlando. Since Woolf’s mock biography is tongue-in-cheek, her biographer could be the ironic voice of the author herself, further contributing to the dialogic nature of the novel.

their desire,” the biographer cannot help but poetically describe Orlando as though he were the feminine object of a romantic poem. From the “red cheeks...covered with peach down” to Orlando’s “exquisite” teeth and lips, forehead and eyes, the biographer waxes poetic about Orlando’s beauty: “we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two bank medallions which were his temples” (13). Woolf ironically breaks from her parody of the biographic style to have her biographer fall into the clichéd similes and metaphors of romantic poetry, but it only heightens the parodic (and ironic) effect of the rest of the novel. Furthermore, these types of physical descriptions of the love object in poetry are generally reserved for the female characters. Therefore, the reader is again called to question Orlando’s sex and what it means to be distinctly a ‘he’ or a ‘she.’

At times, the biographer acknowledges what a “good” biographer ought to do, and yet cannot help himself from doing the very things in which he criticizes. For example: a “good biographer” would typically ignore the “disagreeables” in his subject’s character, a jab at biography’s attempt to appear completely truthful while leaving out the parts of his subject that lower his heroic status. Orlando’s biographer, on the other hand, describes in great detail the many foibles found in Orlando’s character, foibles which will come to frustrate the biographer as the narrative goes on:

Sights disturbed him, like that of his mother...sights exalted him – the birds and the trees; and made him in love with death – the evening sky, the homing rooks; and so, mounting up the spiral stairway into his brain – which was a roomy one – all these sights, and the garden sounds too, the hammer beating, the wood

chopping, began that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests. (13)

The biographer's back-and-forth manner of dealing with such a strange character as Orlando coincides with Woolf's own goal of dismantling the binaries of either/or. Perhaps we should pity our poor biographer because he is only trying to do his job of recording the facts, but the fun is in the perplexity the biographer has when confronted by the ambiguous, poetic, effeminate Orlando.

Interspersed with moments of poetic imagery are attempts to get back on track with Orlando's story. Unfortunately for the biographer, who mystically has the ability to enter Orlando's head, the narrative is overtaken by Orlando's lyrical thoughts and feelings. Descriptions and lists of the glorious things surrounding Orlando such as the domes, spires and turrets of towers in London become "lit up and burnt like a heavenly, many-coloured shield (in Orlando's fancy); now all the west seemed a golden window with troops of angels (in Orlando's fancy again)..." (39). With the parenthetical statements, the biographer is making it quite clear that these are Orlando's fancies and not his own, implying both that he is doing his job of recording the facts as he knows them and that he has grown frustrated by Orlando's preoccupation with poetic description instead of manly acts. The biographer desires action to the point that he creates it where there is none, working off of Orlando's own tendency to feel to the extreme. The reader is teased with the promise of action when "Suddenly [Orlando] was struck in the face by a blow, soft, yet heavy, on the side of his cheek. So strung with expectation was he, that he started and put his hand to his sword. The blow was repeated a dozen times on

forehead and cheek” (44). The reader finds that these “blows” are nothing more than raindrops falling on Orlando’s face.

Another example of how *Orlando*’s parody of biography subverts the established norms of the genre is the contrast between moments of fact-listing and the absence of facts or truths. The one time when Orlando’s biographer actually references an official document, Orlando’s ledgers, occurs because there seems to be nothing else to write about. By this time, the biographer has shown his frustration with Orlando’s life of inaction, of his living inside his head. Orlando has spent all of his time writing, and the biographer has spent his time recording Orlando’s mundane thoughts and feelings while his subject tries to write for “La Gloire,” or ‘glory’ and ‘fame.’ After Nick Greene writes a scathing piece of satire that is obviously about Orlando, Orlando takes leave from his writing and finds peace in nature. But still, there is no excitement or drama for the biographer to tell. Time itself has become ambiguous, and the narrative goes on a tangent about the difference between objective clock time and subjective internal time, or *durée* – a recurring motif in many of Woolf’s works.

Parodying her own use of the bracketed phrase “time passed” in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf has her narrator grow weary of the wordy descriptions from Orlando’s mind as he walks through nature, with the detail of nature representing the passing of time, adding that the wordy description of this walk leads to “a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that ‘Time passed’ (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened” (72). With this statement, Woolf mocks the ways in which literature

attempts to fill in the gaps of time when nothing of interest is happening in the narrative.

The biographer expounds on his theory of time:

This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. But the biographer, whose interests are, as we have said, highly restricted, must confine himself to one simple statement: when a man has reached the age of thirty, as Orlando now had, time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short. (72)

This digression about time allows for the fantasy that is Orlando's life to contain some bit of truth, or perhaps a different kind of realism, because who is to say what is most real when all reality is created through its interpretation in the mind? Memories, thoughts, feelings – for Woolf, all of these contribute to the subjective reality of the self and one's life. To record the 'truths' of one's life is to play with imagination and internality.

After the digression, the biographer, while wishing Orlando would do something noteworthy, has begun to show some allegiances to his creator, Virginia Woolf.

Although frustrated with Orlando's pondering, the alternative does not engage his interest, either. Falling back into writing about those things in which the traditional biography depends, facts and figures, the biographer goes to work listing the inventory of what Orlando bought:

“To fifty pairs of Spanish blankets, ditto curtains of crimson and white taffeta;
The valence to them of white satin embroidered with crimson and white silk....
“To seventy yellow satin chairs and sixty stools, suitable with their buckram
covers to them all
“To sixty-seven walnut tree tables....
“To seventeen dozen boxes containing each dozen five dozen of Venice

glasses....
[and so on] (80)

There is a mix of irony and parody present at this moment in that, now abandoning his writing after Mr. Greene's attack, Orlando has refocused his attention on the domestic sphere. While not the manliest of preoccupations, this at least allows the biographer to give his reader some hard facts concerning his subject; however, even the biographer is left bored by this list: "Already – it is an effect lists have upon us – we are beginning to yawn. But if we stop, it is only that the catalogue is tedious, not that it is finished" (80). Here, the biographer is more in line with Woolf's philosophy of infusing fact with imagination and personality; it's more entertaining, and more helpful, to read the biographer's opinions about the facts at this point than it is to read a dry list of pointless 'truths' that tell us nothing about Orlando as a person.

This parodic moment is also a dig at another of Woolf's bogies: the materialist trend in literature during the late Victorian and Edward periods, materialism that produced an extreme form of social realism focusing on externality and objectivity. As Herbert Marder explains, Woolf's works often show "a deep distrust of rational objectivity" (428). Instead, just as she argues in her essays on biography, she felt that subjectivity and dynamism must infuse literature in order to give justice to the human spirit in fiction. In her essay "Modern Fiction" (1921), Woolf writes, "Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek" (149). That 'thing' in which writers seek, "whether we call it life or spirit, truth

or reality, this, the essential thing; has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (149). She then calls out those materialist writers – H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy – who

...go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision of our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labor misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide, comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figure were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. (149)

Woolf asks, “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” (149). For Woolf, the materialists have it all wrong. Life is not neat and tidy, and she famously declares, “Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (150). Again, we see her motif of combining hard facts (granite and steel) with the evanescent rainbow of the mind, for “life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (150).

Woolf asks, “Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?” (150). Her answer is for writers to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,” to “trace the

pattern, however, disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness (150). To portray 'realism' is to abandon the "proper stuff of fiction" and realize that these outdated conventions have failed to successfully show the complexity of reality (154). Woolf critiques the patriarchal master plot to show how it suppresses, dominates, and creates lifeless characters in the tyranny of detail in materialist fiction. What we are left with in Orlando's narrative are the multiple realities constructed (and reconstructed) in whatever way our biographer can because the master plot simply does not work.

After Orlando has been jilted by the Russian Sasha, the biographer is confronted with one of Orlando's unexplainable changes when he mysteriously falls into a deep sleep for seven days and awakes with a faulty memory. Because there is no logic or reason to this episode, the biographer is left to explain to his reader that "up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth" (49). But Orlando's weeklong slumber

is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretations of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (49)

This is not the only time when the biographer must fill in the gaps. Full of irony, the reader learns that it is "highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted" that at the height of Orlando's career in the noble position of Duke, what the biographer emphasizes as

Orlando's "most important part in the public life of his country," much of the information about his public life was lost in a fire.

The biographer, whether tongue in cheek if read as the voice of Woolf or truly dispirited as the voice of the traditional biographer, expresses his dissatisfaction at the "lamentably incomplete" knowledge of a time in Orlando's life when he was a man of action and purpose, "a moment of great significance," according to the biographer, implying that the more effeminate or private moments are less important. So, with the necessity for the narration to continue, he has no choice but to "speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination" (89). This focus on truth and facts has now been made an impossibility for Woolf's biographer, so now he must rely on presumptions and gossip. Earlier, after Orlando had slept for a week and awakened with a new predilection for solitude, the biographer spends several pages mentioning the various tidbits of gossip shared among his servants. Once the biographer bemoans the loss of facts in the fire and attempts to create a patchwork image of the conferring of the Dukedom, gossip rears its head again in two distinct forms. First is that of the manly English naval officer, John Fenner Brigge, who writes in his diary in stereotypically masculine language about the public scene during the conference, with rockets soaring in the air and the obvious "superiority of the British" while amongst the natives in Constantinople (93-4). The second form of gossip is that of the private sphere, witnessed by Miss Penelope Hartopp. She writes a letter to a female friend, excitedly describing the "ravishing" picture inside the home with images of gold plates, candelabras, and ornate edibles, using words such as "expression" and "feel" (95-6). They imagine Orlando having met with some bad

accident, or that he had found religion and was consumed with religious guilt and piety. Beyond the obvious gendered distinction being made between the public discourse of men and the private discourse of women, Melinda Rabb explains the importance of gossip in satire: “[w]riters of satire employ unauthorized discourses, such as gossip, slander, libel, and secret history, that ‘tell on’ people” (“Secret Memoirs” 349). Also, important to the connection between facts and gender, Rabb reveals that satire has a history of being associated with “gossipy and feminine qualities” that “create a sense of community” (“Secret Life of Satire” 580). Gossip and conjecture in *Orlando* contribute to the sense of collaboration inherent in the construction of narratives and identities, especially considering that identity, for Woolf, is multitudinous and constantly in flux.

Woolf’s ideas on fiction, women’s communities and the arbitrariness of sexual identity come at full force when Orlando falls into another deep sleep and magically awakens in the female form. While Orlando sleeps, the biographer, all in a tizzy, interjects, “And now again obscurity descends, and would indeed that it were deeper,” wishing he could sign off his work as “finis” to “spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried” (99). Orlando’s change from a man to a woman cannot be explained away, and maybe even a biographer’s imagination is insufficient for describing such a confusing event. But, the biographer proclaims, the “austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer” demands “Truth!” (99). What follows is one of the novel’s most humorous displays of parody in the form of a sort of morality play or mock Jonsonian masque, as Julia Briggs has described the episode. In the fashion of a masque “in which the antimasque vices is

dismissed and a sacred figure evoked,” Truth ultimately banishes the “Horrid Sisters” Our Lady of Purity, Our Lady Chastity, and Our Lady of Modesty (Briggs 201). Each is a caricature of feminine virtues, personified to the extreme to lower them into ridiculousness, each getting her part to state her cause: “I am she that men call Modesty. Virgin I am and ever shall be. Not for me the fruitful fields and fertile vineyard. Increase is odious to me; and when the apples burgeon or the flocks breed, I run, I run; I let my mantle fall. My hair covers my eyes. I do not see” (100-1). Woolf parodies the masque form in order to emphasize that the traditional “virtues” of womanliness depicted in these genres involve the false concealment of women’s true selves. Prudery and shame are used to control women by repressing their desires, their bodies, and the reality of their androgyny.

After failing to keep Orlando from waking as a woman and overcome by the indecency of the situation, the sisters hilariously flee “to any cosy nook where there are curtains in plenty” (101). This parody and personification of oppressive feminine virtues is further explored in Woolf’s “Professions for Women,” written in 1931, three years after *Orlando*. In the essay, the timidity and shame of the “Horrid Sisters” are lumped together in the symbolic image of the “Angel in the House” – that spectre that keeps woman in her place by reminding her that men will disapprove if she leaves it by writing. It represents the construct that demands women be “immensely charming,” “unselfish,” and to “never ha[ve] a mind or a wish of [their] own, but prefer to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others” (“Professions” 243). By metaphorically “killing”

the angel in the house, by catching her by the throat to protect herself, women can continue creating their own truths, establishing their own selves in their writing.

For Orlando, the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ is that her change in sex has done nothing to change her identity. She “had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been” (102). This statement points toward the androgyny that has always been present in Orlando, an androgyny that is implied throughout the novel when our hero displays stereotypically less-than-heroic feminine qualities. And as Makiko Minow-Pinkney points out, Orlando “only recognises his/her new sexual identity through the image in the mirror,” but she is not surprised nor affected because she does not understand the future implications of what being labeled ‘woman’ will entail – she has yet to *become* a woman because of her lack of lived experience as one (125). Just as strict genres maintain a sense of stability in form, the terms *man* and *woman* and how society treats those terms preserve distinctions that appear essential and set in stone. With Orlando’s mysterious change of sex and the biographer’s failed attempts to corral his/her story into the form of a biography, Woolf has shown how arbitrary these categories truly are. Furthermore, the idea that Orlando could be either/neither man or woman or both man *and* woman deflates the duality in its entirety. Anne Hermann references Kristeva’s ideas on intertextuality to explain the ‘in-betweenness’ of texts, or the ‘unreadable space’ – an idea that also occurs in *Between the Acts*. She states that “the difference between the sexes [is] not as a fixed opposition (man-woman) but as a process of *differentiation*” (165). Orlando’s biographer supports this concept by remarking on the ambiguity of Orlando’s censuring both sexes equally,

“as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each” (*Orlando* 117). This further destabilizes the terms *man* and *woman*, thereby deconstructing any binaries of gender.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf advances this concept of androgyny, which goes hand in hand with her beliefs in the value of ambiguity in literature. She writes that great minds are androgynous, “man-womanly” or “woman-manly” (128). Like her philosophy of the simultaneous use of “granite” and “rainbow” in fiction, it is this ambiguity or androgyny that leaves the mind “fully fertilized” to use “all its faculties” (128), thus stressing gender as a construction. It takes the deconstruction of the socially-constructed binary to allow for the type of androgyny for which Woolf advocates. And just as *Orlando* is neither male nor female and is both simultaneously, *Orlando* as a novel is neither and both a biography and a fantasy tale. In Woolf's novel all categories become unstable because they are treated ironically. As Pamela Caughie explains:

Orlando, as a writer and as a woman, is both within the common language and apart from it. She need not submit to the tyranny or symbolic systems nor insist on another opposing system. Hers is not such a simple choice. As the novel makes evident, sexual identity, historical periods, and literary styles are all constructs. Each is structured like a language and as such has no fixed or natural relation to anything outside itself. We cannot discover the appropriate form or the true self or the innate differences between the sexes, for there is nothing stable to measure them against. (8)

The only object that differentiates one from the other is ‘clothing’ or style and the expectations society places on it, and Woolf has already shown that, through parody, this difference does not hold.

They say that clothing makes the man, and certainly it is clothing, more than anything, that becomes the first indicator of Orlando’s womanhood. Her biographer describes the phenomenon of identity’s link to one’s clothes and the reaction of society to these clothes. After having purchased women’s clothing, the biographer explains, “It is a strange fact, but a true one that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought” (113). He continues: “it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck that she realized, with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position” (113). Later, the biographer comically digresses from what could be the typical description of the English countryside, “seiz[ing] the opportunity since the landscape...needs no description” (137). Ironically, the biographer has heretofore professed that biography must include factual detail and less opinion, but he implies that much has already been written about the English landscape and, therefore, plows into yet another bout of philosophizing about Orlando’s clothes – not what they look like, in the materialist vein, but *why* they are possibly the reason for Orlando’s changing personality. Now becoming a woman, Orlando falls into fits of crying, vanity, and fear for her safety. She also feels a sense of modesty when it comes to her writing. The biographer ponders the theories that claim that clothes “change our view of the world and the world’s view of us...Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them...they mould

our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (138). In order to escape the confines of society, Orlando takes it upon herself to cross-dress and leave so-called ‘respectable’ society behind. Sandra Gilbert asserts that Orlando is “no more than a transvestite” because she is able to change selves as easily as a transvestite changes clothes. Ultimately, what this proves is that the ‘self’, particularly the gendered self, is nothing more than an “easily, fluidly, interchangeable” costume, which is exactly Woolf’s point in *Orlando* (405).

It is while Orlando is dressed like a lord that he meets the prostitute Nell. Orlando, having quickly picked back up where her male sex was left off, performs the manly manners of gallantly bowing and sweeping off her hat. Nell, playing the role of timid girl, fumbles with the latch while “prattling as women do, to amuse her love, though Orlando could have sworn, from the tone of her voice, that her thoughts were elsewhere” (158-9). Having recently changed into a woman, Orlando is quite aware that Nell is playing the role society expects of her, so, growing frustrated with the act, she reveals her own female sex. At this moment, Woolf destroys the pervasive myth upheld in male-centric literature that women are catty to one another and secretly detest being in one another’s presence. The biographer supports this reading: “‘It is well known,’ says Mr. S. W., ‘that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk; they scratch’” (160). Further parodying biography with the intent to mock, Woolf has the narrator include other ‘facts’ about men’s theories on women’s communities: “it is well known (Mr. T. R. has proved it) ‘that women are incapable of any feeling of affection for their own sex and hold each

other in the greatest aversion” (160-1). Either doing so as to not have to deal with such inconveniences as discussions about women’s sexuality, or, perhaps, channeling Woolf’s ironic dismissal of ridiculous gender stereotypes in masculinist scholarship (I prefer to read it as the latter), the biographer concludes:

As that is not a question that can engage the attention of a sensible man, let us, who enjoy the immunity of all biographer and historians from any sex whatever, pass it over, and merely state that Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex, and leave it to the gentlemen to prove, as they are very fond of doing, that this is impossible. (161)

Once Orlando has shown herself to be a woman, all pretenses between herself and Nell fall away, and they enjoy their conversation without the interference of gender expectations or fear of men listening in. Through this interaction within the women’s community, Orlando is learning to enjoy the freedom of sexuality and continues to play with androgyny in the form of her clothes. Furthermore, this interplay between various selves upholds the Menippean quality of *Orlando* as defined by Bakhtin in its violation of established norms of both genre and gender, through the fantastical elements of abandoning specificity of time, place and sex, and, in particular, the dialogism inherent in the text as author, narrator and protagonist display various facets of the self that challenge one another, often negotiating with each other as each period changes, in order to mock the institutions that try to stifle the dialogue and plasticity of both text and self.

This plasticity and complexity of the self comes under attack particularly during the Victorian period of the novel, a time in which Woolf herself often felt a “repressive patriarchal legacy” inhibiting her own work (Ellis 109). While much of *Orlando* is

playful in its attack, a drastic change in the atmosphere, tone and narrative occur during this time, a time the biographer describes with dark, oppressive imagery. England has now been consumed by heavy clouds, dampness, and “blustering gales” (*Orlando* 166). As de Gay so succinctly puts it, Woolf attacks the idea of “the spirit of the age” by showing it as a “regulatory ideological force” (141). While she does so in each period depicted in the novel, Victorian England is especially attacked for pushing a ‘spirit’ that further divides the sexes and covers reality in the false, smothering blanket of euphemism. The biographer describes how

The damp struck within. Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp in their minds.... Love, birth, and death were all swaddled in a variety of fine phrases. The sexes drew further and further apart. No open conversation was tolerated. Evasions and concealments were sedulously practised on both sides. (167-8)

The biographer, now sounding most like Woolf than he has before, implies that connections may be made between this separation between the sexes, gender norms, the excessiveness of English imperialism, and the subsequent overdone style of Victorian literature. Mirroring the heavy prose of the biographer’s changed style, he paints this picture of Victorian England and its absurd prolificacy:

And just as the ivy and the evergreen rioted in the damp earth outside, so did the same fertility show itself within. The life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded. Thus the British Empire came into existence; and thus – for there is no stopping damp; it gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork – sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes. (168)

With this sudden change in surroundings and attitude, Orlando finds herself a victim of the ‘spirit of the age.’ She learns that she now has a propensity for blushing and feelings of shame. She considers her future buying bassinets and crinolines to hide pregnancies, and the biographer repeatedly inserts parenthetical statements describing her embarrassment as “here she blushed” at each thought (172). She begins to fear for her safety for the first time in her life and exhibits acts of timidity and hesitance (179, 180). She feels her ring finger tingling, reminding her that she must find a man to marry in order to be respectable in this new age: “she could feel herself poisoned through and through, and was forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband” (178).

Worse yet, Orlando finds that, despite “through all these changes she had remained...fundamentally the same,” her writing has become infected with the ‘spirit of the age,’ too. Here, Woolf parodies the “insipid verse” in what she sees as the conventional poetry of the Victorian period. The poem Orlando is in the process of writing is, according to Maria DiBattista’s annotation in the back of the novel, from Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s “The Lines of Life” in the collection *The Venetian Bracelet and Other Poems* (1829). Interestingly, this is the first time Woolf criticizes a work by a woman writer in the novel. But Landon’s poem represents the stifling of the woman poet during the period: it is not really Landon’s fault but her acquiescence to the ‘spirit of the age.’ In *The Poetics of Sensibility*, Jerome McGann constructs an image of Landon as a figure who fully understood her place in Victorian society, describing her poetic style as often seen as “self-conscious,” “reserved” or “self-censored” (146). She understood that

she “lived in a world of signs and conventions,” so she “rehearses established forms and ideas, she echoes and alludes to recognized authors and styles” (146). The irony here is that Woolf does the same. Just as Woolf acknowledges her battle with the “Angel in the House” in “Professions for Women,” she accepts that women in any time must navigate the ‘spirit of the age.’ For Woolf, though, the difference seems to be in the methodology. Instead of simply regurgitating that which has come before, or that which is the stylistic trend of the time, Woolf simultaneously upholds and repudiates her predecessors *and* her contemporaries, imitating, boosting and deflating them all at once. It is part of the magic built in to Woolf’s ambiguous parodies. But for Orlando, this “insipid verse” simply will not do. In order to gain control and freedom to write again, she must compromise with the ‘spirit of the age’ and marry an androgyne like herself.

Orlando’s compromise comes in the form of Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire – a name that is, in and of itself, quite ridiculous. The way in which Orlando finds Shelmerdine is made even more comical for those experienced in Romantic and Victorian Gothic clichés. Having become completely overtaken by the ‘spirit of the age’ and some “strange ecstasy,” she runs through nature and trips and falls, breaking her ankle. She murmurs and sighs melodramatically, “I have found my mate... It is the moor. I am nature’s bride.... Here will I lie....My hands shall wear no wedding ring.... The roots shall twine about them. Ah!” (182). This moment of “strange ecstasy” pokes fun of the gothic style as a whole and specifically parodies Catherine Earnshaw’s “mad effusions” in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (DiBattista’s annotations in *Orlando* 299). The absurdity of Orlando’s ecstatic declarations become all the more absurd when

Shelmerdine, gallantly riding through on his horse, leaps to the ground to save her. With no transition or explanation, the biographer jumps from this moment of rescue to “A few minutes later, they became engaged,” thus making fun of romantic conventions of the frail woman needing to be rescued, and the romantic literary clichés that continue (183). Of course at this moment Orlando must become engaged, soon marry, and quickly give birth, all life changing events glossed over by her biographer. But while the plot and imagery seem conventional, an important difference exists: both Orlando *and* Shelmerdine are androgynous. “You’re a woman, Shel!” cries Orlando; “You’re a man, Orlando!” responds Shelmerdine. Both have fluid enough sexes, genders and selves that this relationship between the two is not stifling for Orlando. And because she has adapted to the ‘spirit of the age,’ she can now ignore the “Angel in the House” looking over her shoulder and move on to more important things like her writing:

At this point she felt that power (remember we are dealing with the most obscure manifestations of the human spirit) which had been reading over her shoulder, tell her to stop. Grass, the power seemed to say, going back with a ruler such as governesses use to the beginning, is all right; the hanging cups of fritillaries – admirable; the snaky flower – a thought strong from a lady’s pen, perhaps, but Wordsworth, no doubt, sanctions it; but – girls? Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that’ll do. And so the spirit passed on. (195-6)

Orlando’s marriage becomes a necessary compromise, and she feels the shackles of Victorianism fall away.

By the final chapter of the novel, *Orlando* has successfully parodied the traditional genres and writers of the past, including the “Great Men” of biography, but

just as what happens in *Between the Acts*, the narrative must end by dealing with the present time. As the novel ends, time collapses in on itself as Orlando's present reality becomes intermixed with her memories of the past. Visions of Queen Elizabeth and memories of feelings and sensory experience invade her mind as the biographer's style mixes with the stream of consciousness made so famous by the author. Contemporary images of modern shops, lifts, and omnibuses are sandwiched between cries of "Faithless!" when Orlando remembers the Russian Sasha who had once broken her heart. Noblemen and present day everymen ride with one another as Orlando tries to collect herself as "Nothing is any longer one thing" (223). The ambiguity and plasticity of time and place, as well as the multiple selves created through experience, are brought together because "the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past" and Orlando "had a great variety of selves to call upon" (223, 226). The goal of the writer is to create unity out of all of these fragments, thus finding the "true self." The biographer's writing becomes more and more stream of consciousness, showing the overpouring of ecstasy as Orlando embraces all of the multiplicity and ambiguity of life. This parody and pastiche of Woolf's own writing style brings the novel to a close, one that is, indeed, full of ambiguity. Is the wild goose what Orlando had been looking for along, or is it simply a last dig at the attempts to find and label "truth" in a world full of chaos and ambiguity? Is the novel just a wild goose chase? While the image of the goose might never be fully understood, the 'wild goose chase' of understanding the truths in life and history will continue to be a running theme in Woolf's later fiction.

In the following chapter, I will continue my discussion of Woolf as parodist, focusing on her last novel, *Between the Acts*. Although *Orlando* is not a literal three hundred year carnival, and the absurdity, gender-swapping, costume and transvestism are more a figurative representation of the carnivalesque in literature, *Between the Acts* removes the fantastical gender-swapping in favor of a more realistic exploration of genre and gender norms during a more literal representation of festive gathering – that of the English country pageant. Just as *Orlando* looks back to literary traditions to analyze the multiple realities of life, *Between the Acts* gathers the myths supported in literature and history to call into question hierarchies and institutions that create divisiveness within a community.

CHAPTER IV

‘DISPERSED ARE WE’: THE SERIO-COMIC PERFORMANCE OF MENIPPEAN CARNIVAL IN *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

Menippean discourse is both comic and tragic, or rather, it is *serious* in the same sense as is the carnivalesque; through the status of its words, it is politically and socially disturbing. It frees speech from historical constraints, and this entails a thorough boldness in philosophical and imaginative inventiveness.

- Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel”

As a work of comedic satire, Denise Marshall describes Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* as “a fulfillment of *Orlando* but at Woolf’s most sardonic and savage comedic stretch” (155). Indeed, many of the themes and concerns explored in Woolf’s playful fantasy come to a head in her final novel. As discussed in chapter two, despite her contemporaries’ charges and early criticism claiming that she, along with her Bloomsbury counterparts, focused on aesthetics and trivialities instead of the serious social and political issues of her time, recent scholarship has rescued Woolf’s works from the narrow focus on her experimentalism, or the image of her as the isolated artist trapped within her own mind. And *Between the Acts* is arguably her most political novel. Problematic issues of nationalism, masculine violence, the separation between the sexes, the isolation of the individual within the community, and the artist’s role in either questioning or upholding these issues abound in the novel. More importantly, *Between*

the Acts demonstrates how these issues have contributed to the political crisis of the 1930's: the rise of fascism and a new war.

In much the same way as *Orlando*, Woolf began *Between the Acts* as a piece of fun for her own enjoyment, to “amuse” herself, but part of her intent was to “explore a new criticism” that blended different genres into the novel form (*A Writer's Diary* 279, 275). In Woolf's own words, the novel was meant to be “dialogue: and poetry: and prose; all quite distinct. No more long closely written books,” and all of these fragments of the literary tradition would be “discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour...” (275, 279). The unity of these diverse fragments would be demonstrated throughout the novel through the communal metaphor of the country pageant and its various villagers:

But ‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted.... ‘We’..the composed of many different things...we all life, all art, all waifs and strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole – the present state of my mind? And English country and a scenic old house – and a terrace where nursemaids walk – and people passing – and a perpetual variety and change from intensity to prose, and facts – and notes.... (279-80)

At the same time that Woolf was imagining her novel's playfulness, hybridity and communal nature, she was concerned with the dangerous realities of another world war. In 1938, only three months after having written with excitement about her new project, Woolf wrote in her diary of a conversation between her husband, Leonard, and herself. By 1938, Hitler had come to power and invaded not only countries but the minds of the

people as well, and those in England were awaiting the inevitable day in which they would be dragged into war with Germany. Woolf writes:

So, at supper, we discussed our generation: and the prospects of war. Hitler has his million men now under arms. Is it only summer manœuvres or—? Harold broadcasting in his man of the world manner hints it may be war. That is the complete ruin not only of civilisation in Europe, but of our last lap. (*Writer's Diary* 289)

The public infiltrates the private as Woolf continues to write how her nephew, Quentin Bell, has been conscripted. Feeling helpless, she concludes her diary entry, “One ceases to think about it – that all. Goes on discussing the new room, new chair, new books. What else can a gnat on a blade of grass do?,” and she mentions her wish to continue working on *Poynz Hall*, what would eventually become *Between the Acts* (289-90).

Based on these diary entries alone, it is easy to see the tension between Woolf's desire to ‘play’ and continue her craft and the constant reminder of the ‘real world’ outside of her art. Although *Between the Acts* is full of comedic satire, poking fun at the absurdities of common life and the people's attachment to the ‘roles’ passed down to them through literature and history, there is a heaviness in tone and purpose that invades Woolf's playful experiment. The novel is a difficult, ambiguous text because, while retaining its playfulness and experimentation, the intent of the novel is one of serious social and cultural critique. Woolf satirically presents history, both public and private, in order to challenge the primacy of traditional understandings of history and the literary tradition as absolute and unchanging, and it does so in a much more urgent manner than that which is found in the fantastical *Orlando*. Whether the actual pageant or the

narrative ‘between the acts’ of the play, the novel illustrates the dangerous consequences of upholding a nationalistic history and literary tradition that are complicit in the current political crisis taking place in the novel in 1939 England. Much of this portrayal was discussed in her essay *Three Guineas*, but Woolf shifts from the didacticism of the essay to an ambiguously constructed, playful hybrid narrative that, through the use of the carnivalesque, explores the intersections between nationalism, patriarchy, war, and the people’s current state of isolation and alienation.

In 1937, while Virginia Woolf was first contemplating her new project that would eventually become *Between the Acts*, she was hard at work on her pacifist manifesto, *Three Guineas*. The connections between the two works are strong: working as companion pieces, both writings directly relate to questions of nation, subjectivity, and war. Set up as a response to a pacifist society’s letter asking for advice on how to stop war, Woolf outlines the social forces that have contributed to the growth of fascism. She connects the institutions of patriarchal power and authoritarianism she observes at home in England to the authoritarian mentality abroad. Furthermore, she argues it is the separation between the sexes and strict gender roles that have added to the inclination towards war and violence. From the outset, Woolf finds it difficult to respond as a woman to a man’s letter asking for advice about a subject in which women have been historically excluded. This separation between the sexes is clear when she notes the hesitance in her reply, represented by her characteristic use of ellipses: “But...those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across

it” (155). If their gender fragmentation impedes communication as Woolf implies, then how can she possibly give the sender advice about ending war?

What Woolf does conclude is that, due to social conditioning and experience, men and women understand love of country differently. For men, there is much to be gained from hypermasculinity and fighting, and Woolf explains why men fight:

For though many instincts are held more or less in common by both sexes, to fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s. Law and practice have developed that difference, whether innate or accidental. Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle.... Why fight?... Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we have never felt or enjoyed... [Fighting is] an outlet for manly qualities, without which men would deteriorate. (158-60)

In addition to venting those “manly qualities,” fighting and war have served as a respectable profession and source of happiness, excitement and pride for men. Rewards, titles, and distinctions are offered to those who fight for their country, thus contributing to the never-ending cycle of hierarchy, domination and violence. As *Orlando* comically demonstrates, the problem with histories and biographies is that they all deal with some aspect of war, whether it be battles, chivalry, violence, or the less overt aspects of war such as the gaining of titles, ceremonies, imperialistic endeavors, and other ‘accomplishments’ of history’s ‘Great Men.’ Woolf explicitly links these historical accounts to the separation between the sexes:

Such was, such perhaps still is, the relationship of many brothers and sisters in private, as individuals. They respect each other and help each other and have aims in common. Why then, if such can be their private relationships...should their public relationship, as law and history prove, be so very different? (307)

She sees the clear difference between how men and women relate to one another in the private sphere versus what is usually depicted in histories and other narratives. As shown in *Orlando*, writers responsible for the accounts of “Great Men” leave out that which is private and personal in favor of publicized heroics. As I will show, in *Between the Acts* this separation will become the central problem in both the pageant and the lives inhabiting the liminal spaces between the acts of the play, causing the characters to feel isolated and, in the case of the men in the novel, violent or aggressive.

So what can a woman do, and what does ‘patriotism’ mean to her? Woolf tackles these questions in *Three Guineas*. Because “history and biography when questioned would seem to show that her position in the home of freedom has been different from her brothers” and, “therefore her interpretation of the word ‘patriotism’ may well differ from his,” it seems that the only solution is for women to embrace their role as outsiders (162). For only as outsiders will women be able to maintain their difference – their different experiences, their different demands for rights, their different values and interpretations, all of which help women continue to question the givens that have led to war and assert their influence on men so as to help end it. As Woolf clearly states, “We can only help you to defend culture and intellectual liberty by defending our own culture and our own intellectual liberty” (282-3). And it is clear where she thinks England should prioritize its goals toward peace: “Should we not help her to crush [fascism] in her own country before we ask her to help us to crush him abroad? And what right have we, sir, to trumpet our ideals of freedom and justice to other countries when we can shake out from our most respectable newspapers any day of the week eggs like these?” (229-30). These “eggs,” as

Woolf calls them, are opinion pieces supporting the subordination of women, particularly concerning their place in the public sphere. Without equality, there can be no freedom.

What is most relevant to this discussion is Woolf's implication that the Englishmen demanding women take inferior roles are full of hypocrisy. They call for freedom, equality, and anti-authoritarianism abroad but refuse to extend those same rights to all in their own country. This is exactly why patriotism, nationalism, and the traditional displays of pomp and circumstance are made so ridiculous in *Three Guineas*. Woolf shows that these ideals about one's country are no longer questioned and are, instead, accepted as givens. Therefore, it is woman's responsibility to retain "freedom from unreal loyalties," as Woolf implores women outsiders to "never cease from thinking – what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them?" (267, 244). Paradoxically, it is this separation as 'Outsider' that allows for change and new thought while contributing to the community as a whole: for Woolf, fragmentation (the individual) and unity (community) coincide. What is found in *Three Guineas* is the blueprint for how society works, or *should* work, in *Between the Acts*, what obstacles need to be overcome in the 'real world,' and how the individual can work within the community for change. What must happen for change to take place is for the individuals to be willing to communicate with one another despite their differences and for everyone to acknowledge that "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (*Three Guineas* 364). *Between the Acts* uses the ambiguously situated Miss La Trobe and her pageant to unite the public and private worlds, and

Virginia Woolf, as author, uses the carnivalesque to challenge the social stabilities that have been put into place in both worlds, as well as the historical and literary norms that have become stagnant and oppressive. What the reader finds is that nothing is stable, everything is subject to interpretation and play, and this allows for *re*interpretation, multiplicity and change.

In *Orlando*, dialogism and carnival are metaphorically presented through the fantastical rendering of Orlando's skipping through centuries and magically changing sexes; in *Between the Acts*, these Bakhtinian ideas are observed in the realistic, day-to-day experiences of the English villagers and their seeking entertainment in Miss La Trobe's country pageant. Nothing necessarily bizarre or fanciful occurs in *Between the Acts*, and Woolf focuses her attention on the mundane details, conversations and thoughts of the characters. The only activity separating the day from any other is the play, and Woolf's narrative surrounding, and including, the play is chronological and straightforward with no flashbacks and less free indirect discourse than her typical style. The reader clearly knows who says what, and the plot jumps neither here nor there. And while the play is episodic in nature, it also follows chronologically, clearly delineating one historical period from another. There is no confusion as to what is happening; the disorientation lies in the ambiguity of the play and the audience's perceptions of it.

As a distinct and obvious bit of parody, Miss La Trobe's play harks back to the parodic carnivals of the ancient Greeks and Romans when performers, as Bakhtin describes, "on the one hand travestied national and local myths and on the other mimicked the characteristically typical 'languages' and speech mannerisms of foreign

doctors, procurers, *hetaerae*, peasants, slaves and so forth,” thus providing “the corrective of laughter and criticism” (*Dialogic Imagination* 57). As previously mentioned, Menippean satire is informed by what Bakhtin refers to as “carnavalesque,” and he “bases this metaphor on the medieval carnival, a celebration during which normal rules and hierarchies were inverted or suspended and in which representatives of various social groups intermixed far more freely than in normal life” (Booker 1). This diversity contributes to the dialogic in that multiple points of view are shared, both in the differing voices of the characters and in the multiple meanings gleaned from the intertextuality within the satiric form as every voice is given equal weight. Furthermore, in Menippean satire, this dialogism of intertextuality undercuts and reinterprets the original source; therefore, a character might quote another work, only for that work to be either challenged or used to supply other meanings to what is happening in the novel. According to Robert Young, Bakhtin believed that carnival “provides the only historical moment in which the heteroglossia of the world is dialogized” (52). He adds:

Dancing in the streets thus partakes of the utopic, nostalgic element in carnival; parody of the official discourses by contrast makes up the subversive, politically effective component. The implication of this is that while on the one hand social carnival is the realm of freedom from constraint, it is only when it is directed by being given form in the novel that it becomes politically effective. (52-3)

Carnival becomes the symbol for transgression and the deconstruction of social boundaries, and this transgressive nature is, indeed, highly political and of serious intent.

In accordance with Bakhtin’s ideas on the carnivalesque and intertextuality, Julia Kristeva writes of the subversive nature of the Bakhtin’s carnival as a metaphor for the

freedom, play, and diversity found in the novel. She argues that carnivalesque discourse “breaks through grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest” (Kristeva 36). What is important in Bakhtin’s understanding of the dialogism found in the novel form is that it replaces “the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure” (Kristeva 35). In other words, dialogism allows for dynamism rather than the fixed meanings typically assigned to monologic works. Intertextuality creates a conversation among various works, as well as between the writer, character, past works, and cultural contexts. Being in dialogue with one another, texts reinvent each other and the histories in which they are informed. Thus, Bakhtin’s theory is subversive because it allows for freedom, play, diversity and, most important for this discussion, a response to and reinvention of that which has come before. Bakhtin’s carnival becomes the metaphor for this play and reinvention. According to Kristeva, Menippean satire *is* a carnivalesque genre in that it is “pliant and variable” and “capable of insinuating itself into other genres” (Kristeva 52). For Woolf, not only is Menippean satire inserted into other genres but other genres are fused into the novel for a dialogic effect that destabilizes English history and the literary tradition.

In *Between the Acts*, this intertextuality appears in both the dialogue between the play as characters quote and misquote works from the literary tradition and the dialogue within the play that parodies representative works from each time period. Through this inclusion of multiple voices and parodying both high and low culture, the carnivalesque nature of the play breaks down boundaries and hierarchies, freeing those voices often

ignored in history and the literary tradition. Just as the dialogic through parody is present throughout *Orlando* and illustrates a competing relationship between the “representing discourse,” in Bakhtin’s words, and its intentions as used in the form of parody (*Dialogic Imagination* 364), so it is in Miss La Trobe’s play and the novel as a whole. The canon of English literature is transformed by La Trobe’s parody, marking literary history with her ‘otherness’ as woman, foreigner and lesbian. Ironically, although Bakhtin makes the argument that drama is the most monologic of literary forms, Woolf challenges this monologism through “the multileveled interaction between author, producer, and audience against the background of such a unified world,” which ultimately “produces dialogic oppositions” in that these oppositions are dramatized by “staging the interaction between female dramatist, the production of her work, and the audience’s reception of it against the unity of a canonized literary history” (Herrmann 125). Therefore, meaning is being made in the present moment as the performance of the past is reinvented and reread by creator and audience. The triangulation is complex, with La Trobe carrying out the work of artist and Woolfian persona/author and the continual changes in meaning-making as the audience and actors interject their own thoughts into the multiple narratives of the novel and play. Woolf’s examination of the intersections between hypermasculinity, patriarchy and militarism in *Three Guineas* is transformed into a play that paradoxically mocks patriarchal standards and leaves many other standards completely out. Colonel Mayhew asks, “Why leave out the British Army? What’s history without the army, eh?” (*Between the Acts* 107). For Miss La Trobe, an alternate history is needed that does show

that the army can indeed be left out of history in favor of other voices – those of the common people.

Seemingly celebratory of English history and its literature, in the framework of carnival Miss La Trobe's pageant contains a serious political bend as well. Using parody and a good dose of irony and satiric mocking, the play covers a condensed version of English history and literature from the 'birth' of England to the present day, and the celebratory nature of the pageant is called into question. From the very first words spoken by the "small girl," Phyllis Jones, acting out the part of England, the carnivalesque ethos of the play is presented: "Gentles and simples, I address you all..." (*Between the Acts* 53). Those of all classes, gentles and simples, are brought together in La Trobe's history as connected to England's rich history – a connection often missed in the traditional histories and literary works depicting English culture. In La Trobe's version of English history, a seemingly small, insignificant girl can play England, no matter how much she bumbles through her lines. The reader of the novel is given several layers of dialogue and meaning as the play's audience discusses the actions, as well as their understandings, of both the play and the actors in it. "England am I," begins Phyllis Jones, and in the carnivalesque tradition the audience responds to one another, "She's England...It's begun. The prologue" (53). True to Woolf's multilayered, dialogic presentation of the play, the reader is offered more meaning behind these phrases when 'England' forgets her lines and the other actors' singing is blown away by the wind.

Much of the satire comes in the form of the dialogic relationship between the presentation of historical characters, La Trobe's dialogue, the actors' delivery, and the

audience's expectations and comments. Everyday people play the roles of the 'great' men and women of history, and the audience fills in the gaps for the reader of the novel through the commentary and background information about each actor. For example: the working class Eliza Clark, whom the audience recognizes as the shopkeeper "licensed to sell tobacco," plays the role of another 'great' Eliza of English history, Queen Elizabeth (57). Herbert Marder considers the image of Eliza Clark as Queen Elizabeth an example of one of Woolf's many satiric "deflating images" in *Between the Acts* (431). By having a common, everyday person playing the role of the great Queen Elizabeth, Woolf, through the artist La Trobe, calls into question the boundaries between the two. What counts as 'great?' What lives are important enough to be the subjects of a literary history? Both representations of humanity (high and low) are presented as constructions, and, as Marder states, "What we have here...is skillful satire rather than a true slice of village life" (432). Instead of the supposed realism attempted in traditional accounts of English history, we are left with an "irreverent synopsis of English literary and cultural history, both in the actual pageant and the narrative between the acts of the play" (Marder 433). Despite La Trobe's seriousness of purpose, the audience gets a good laugh at "Merry England" and Eliza who "was splendidly made up," wearing a mish-mash of pearls, satin, "sixpenny brooches" that "glared like cats' eyes and tigers' eyes," and a silvery cape that was "in fact swabs used to scour saucepans" (57-8). Eliza's proud speech for England is made ridiculous once the wind interferes, tugging at her headdress, and the boisterous Mrs. Manresa cries, "Bravo! Bravo!...There's life in the old dog yet!"

while “the ruff had become unpinned and Great Eliza had forgotten her lines. But the audience laughed so loud that it did not matter” (59).

By the end of the Elizabethan playlet, villagers dressed as dukes, priests, shepherds, pilgrims and serving men encircle Eliza, dancing around “the majestic figure of the Elizabethan age personified by Mrs. Clark, licensed to sell tobacco, on her soap box” (64). The narrator, telling us of William’s thoughts, describes the scene as “a mellay; a medley, an entrancing spectacle” (64), emphasizing the playful celebration of the audience and the unity La Trobe depicts as associated with Renaissance England. David McWhirter argues that Woolf had an affinity for the Renaissance period and its literature, viewing it as more “communal, democratic ethos premised...on a loosening, rather than a hardening, of class and gender distinctions” (252), and the image of the villagers dressed in the garb of various groups of different classes and positions supports the type of unity for which Woolf was nostalgic during a time of alienation, fragmentation, and war. Although made absurd in the carnivalesque sense, this image is one of community and equalization as the “great queen” is brought down to the level of the people celebrating her. In the spirit of Bakhtinian carnival, the play is “a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators” (*Dostoevsky* 122). The audience’s participation further breaks down barriers between actors and viewers, spectacle and gaze.

This irreverence for English history and its ‘great’ figures does not end with the leveling of queens and villagers. Just as ‘England’ forgets her lines, so, too, have the people conveniently forgotten their complicity in the present political crisis

overshadowing the jovial spirit of the pageant; La Trobe hopes to remind the villagers of their role in the current tug-of-war for power. As war planes fly overhead and villagers talk of Hitler, “those Germans,” and “the Jews,” the reader is offered what Christopher Ames labels “the most stinging parody” yet – that of the Victorian period (399). But while Ames focuses on the comedy and hilarity of the pageant and the cannibalistic lampooning of “official seriousness,” that humor is clouded by the seriousness of war and how patriarchal and oppressive traditions have contributed to the alienation of the people. Just as *Three Guineas* mocks patriotic notions of titles, honors, and, as Nick Greene humorously declares in *Orlando*, “Glawr!,” the Victorian playlet crushes traditional nationalistic symbols of Victorian England and its history of imperialism. Communal “Merry England” has been replaced with images of ‘Otherizing’ and domination.

The first character presented to the crowd is the “huge symbolical figure” of Budge “the publican” who enters as “a pompous march tune brayed” (109). The depiction of Budge could come straight out of the collection of pictures included in *Three Guineas*:

He wore a long black many-caped cloak; waterproof; shiny; of the substance of a statue in Parliament Square; a helmet which suggested a policeman; a row of medals crossed his breast; and in his right hand he held extended a special constable’s baton.... He waved his truncheon.... He paused, eminent, dominant, glaring from his pedestal. (109-11)

In the dialogic play of carnival, the power and superiority of Budge’s role is undercut by the humorous knowledge the reader gains from the audience’s perception of him. The audience cannot divorce the role from their fellow villager, despite Budge’s excellent

disguise that makes it difficult for the “cronies who drank with him nightly” to recognize him (109). As the narrator records: “‘Budge, Budge. That’s Mr. Budge,’ the audience whispered” (109). The audience plays their parts, too, while Budge points his truncheon at Lucy Swithin, who reacts appropriately by raising her hand in submission to his authority. But the audience remains unaware of the deeper meanings and messages La Trobe is supplying. Victorian England sketched in La Trobe’s play is all that Virginia Woolf herself criticized with its focus on morality, obeying “the laws of God and Man,” maintaining purity, setting up spies inside the domestic sphere through the creation of good little imperialists, prizing prosperity and respectability, exploiting the labor of both the working class in England and those England has colonized abroad. Budge recites his lines:

...it’s the natives of Peru require protection and correction; we give ‘em what’s due. But mark you, our rule don’t end there. It’s a Christian country, our Empire; under the White Queen Victoria. Over thought and religion; drink; dress; manners; marriage too, I wield my truncheon.... The ruler of an Empire must keep his eye on the cot; spy too in the kitchen; drawing-room; library; where one or two, me and you, come together. Purity our watchword; prosperity and respectability. If not, why, let ‘em fester in... Cripplegate; St. Giles’s; Whitechapel; the Minorities. Let ‘em sweat at the mines; cough at the looms; rightly endure their lot. That’s the price of Empire; that’s the white man’s burden. And, I can tell you, to direct the traffic orderly, at ‘Yde Park Corner, Piccadilly Circus, is a whole-time, white man’s job. (111)

Parodying the nationalist-imperialist rhetoric of Rudyard Kipling, Budge parrots the typical statements and beliefs in support of ‘Merry England’ and its colonizing power, but through parody and readerly recognition, the ‘Truths’ in Budge’s speech begin to fall flat. While presented as the ‘glory’ of England and its past, the reader is called to

question the oppressively patriotic and inhumane language of Budge's speech supporting the subjugation of people and the watch-dog mentality at home which, in turn, places "all pieties and revered aspects of official culture" in a tenuous position (Ames 400). The audience may view Budge as cutting a fine figure of a man, but the reader of Woolf's novel bitterly laughs at their lack of awareness. Using Miss La Trobe and her play as her mouthpiece, Woolf dashes the patriarchal and imperialistic arrogance found in traditional representations of England; the "glawr" of England is implied to be anything but glorious. It is this arrogance and insistence on hierarchies of power that have contributed to the rise in fascism and the images of war creeping through the dialogue of the novel. Humorous, undercutting irony is furthered when Budge ends his speech with a description of the Victorian home and the empty sloganeering of "'Ome, ladies, 'Ome, gentlemen. Be it never so humble, there's no place like 'Ome," thus connecting the atrocities in which England has participated abroad to the strict roles within the domestic sphere (117).

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin describes the history of carnival and its relationship to the grotesque. He explains how there were two popular types of festivals during the Middle Ages, one being the official festival sponsored by either the church or the state and the other being the folk festivals of the common people. Bakhtin characterizes official festivals as formal, monolithic, and humorless in their showing of respect for existing hierarchies, religious morals and norms. They favored images of piety and stability, "the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable," "sanction[ing] the existing pattern of things

and reinforc[ing] it” with “changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past “(9). In opposition to the rigidity and piety found in the official festivals, where “rank was especially evident” and “everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling” and “take the place corresponding to his position,” carnivalistic folk festivals allowed for humor and “the suspension of all hierarchical precedence” (10). While the official festivals demonstrated a “consecration of inequality,” “all were considered equal during carnival” (10). For this social equality to be demonstrated, high culture was often undercut by the inclusion of low culture. As Bakhtin insists, “In grotesque realism...the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people” (19). In other words, grotesque realism and the image of the grotesque body are equalizing, communal forces. They are “contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed,” and “this exaggeration has a positive, assertive character” (19).

Although Bakhtin references Rabelaisian images that are less ironic and more directly connected to rebirth and renewal, when used ironically the grotesque also has the power to destabilize that which has traditionally been presented as stable or above mockery. As a transgressive element, that which is presented as grotesque challenges the hierarchies that the official festival upholds, thereby allowing for a kind of ‘rebirth’ of ideas or reinvention of the old. In *Between the Acts*, nowhere is this mocking humor and carnivalesque subversion more obvious than in the blasphemous, grotesque image of the donkey in the Victorian playlet. The playlet is filled with comical jabs at patriotism,

patriarchy, religion and imperialism, but the one incident that succeeds in offending the audience occurs while Mr. Hardcastle prays. Heavy symbolism is present in Mr. Hardcastle's fumbling with a fossil during his prayer, signifying the out-datedness of his beliefs, especially keeping in mind that the prayer thanks God for enlightening the people and giving the gift of peace – an ironic statement considering that 1939 England is on the brink of war. The prayer is further undercut in one of the most Rabelaisian moments in Woolf's career: the village idiot, Albert, is dressed as the hindquarters of a donkey and becomes "active," or aroused, during the prayer and amidst cries from the other characters asking for the strength "To convert the heathen!" (116). That which is high and official (religious prayer) is brought low by the grotesque image of the aroused donkey. Furthermore, the audience supplies added humor because the deflating image plays with their expectations of what is right and proper. Etty Springett snaps, "Cheap and nasty, I call it," while Mrs. Lynn Jones focuses on the lack of hygiene in the Victorian home, "like a bit of meat gone sour, with whiskers" (118).

Ironically, the intent of the play *is* to paint the Victorian home as 'off.' Like in *Three Guineas*, Woolf demonstrates how the patriarchal hierarchies and surveillance within the home mirrors the imperialism, violence, and control outside of it. Furthermore, the same problems inherent in Victorianism are found in the present day: "and if finally we did ever understand more than Woolf herself her response to the 'Victorian'...there is still Mrs. Swithin to contend with" (Ellis 170). Ellis is referring to Mrs. Swithin's response to Isa's question of "Were they like that?": "The Victorians,' Mrs. Swithin mused, 'I don't believe,' she said with her odd little smile, 'that there ever

were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently” (*Between the Acts* 118). Although certain conventions and mode of dress change with the times, the English people appear stuck in a perpetual state of oppression, fragmentation, and unawareness; they really are not all that different from the Victorians, facing the same oppressions, fears, imperialistic attitude, and the same ridiculous (yet dangerous) separation between the sexes.

While the example of the donkey might be the most obvious example of the grotesque body in the novel, much of the grotesque may be found between the acts of the play in the absurdities and the breakdown of communication between those characters who make up the audience. “In the structures of the later novels,” Denise Marshall explains, “the sardonic gruesomeness of life’s absurdities is sometimes set inside a lyric quietness, a setting which emphasizes the grotesque even more. Increasing dissonance within the novels supports and maintains a tension of ambiguity which is not resolved” (153). In a novel like *Between the Acts*, many of those absurdities and moments of the grotesque are couched within the mundane discussions between the characters. At the very beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to this absurd mixing of high and low culture, but as Marshall states, the grotesque is made more apparent because of the lyrical quietness: “It was a summer’s night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool” (*Between the Acts* 3). The ironic humor is in the merging of the pastoral setting of a country house on a summer’s night with the inappropriate reminder of the filth of bodily functions. While tea-table talk might cover the mundanities of everyday life, this uncivilized reminder of humanity’s

defilement and the community's failure at containing it is a bit too much for Mrs. Haines, who retorts, "What a subject to talk about on a night like this!" (3). This image of the villagers discussing a cesspool sets up the novel's carnivalesque take on propriety, humanity, and the connection to the natural world.

In the world depicted in *Between the Acts*, the grotesquerie usually comes about in the miscommunications and loss of words, whether the miscommunications between the audience members outside of the play or the actual words and dialogue outside and inside the play as nature, technology, other people and self interrupt. Words are blown away by the wind and interrupted by mooing cows, the gramophone skips and warplanes fly overhead, and, as discussed, flawed human actors forget their lines or bumble through their parts in the play. Between the acts of the play, the villagers also quote and misquote past literature. Bart attempts to quote Byron and forgets, while Isa thinks of Shelley but then orders fish. Both memory and the everyday continuously cause words and sentences to be lost amongst the confusion of ordinary life. Much of the satirical play of language in the novel happens between the acts of the pageant, thereby highlighting the carnivalesque in everyday life. Woolf was interested in the ways people play their assigned roles and the alienation these oppressive roles create. But what happens when individual roles, both private and public, are forced together during a community event concentrated on literary conventions and a celebration of English culture? What Woolf constructs is a dialogic grouping of phrases, literary clichés, fragments of popular song, and predictable thoughts and actions that are exaggerated in order to show that the villagers in the novel are stuck in a cycle of repetition. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf senses a

pattern of patriarchy that seems almost impossible to break: “it seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition,” and this repetition specifically relates to that of violence, domination and war (249). As Herbert Marder puts it, “life at Pointz Hall seems carefully rehearsed, at times almost painfully so” (427). It is only through the intrusion of the ambiguous Miss La Trobe and her revisioning of literary tradition and history that any change or newness seems to come to the village, but even that is fleeting. Ironically, although Bakhtin writes that drama is the most monologic genre, it is the anticipation of and participation in the play that drives the dialogism of the novel.

Much of the grotesqueness in the novel takes the form of “horrendous outbursts” that “combine morbid qualities with carnival spirit” (White 18). These grotesque moments are used to deflate the very same patriarchal ideals Woolf condemned in *Three Guineas* as having caused the alienation of the English people, the separation of the sexes, and, ultimately war. Images of rape, violence and domination abound in the thoughts and actions of the characters who take on the roles they have been given as they express dissatisfaction at the repetition and monotony at Pointz Hall. This repetition, dissatisfaction, and the subsequent loss of communication is most clearly found in the thoughts of Giles who could only “show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe – over there – was bristling like...He had no command of metaphor” (37). Shortly before his slight outburst of “nick[ing] his chair into position with a jerk,” the reader is given a brief description of what all has *not* changed at Pointz Hall:

1830 was true in 1939. No house had been built; no town had sprung up. Hogben's Folly was still eminent; the very flat, field-parcelled land had changed only in this – the tractor had to some extent superseded the plough. The horse had gone; but the cow remained....When they were alone, they said nothing. They looked at the view; they looked at what they knew, to see if what they knew might perhaps be different today. Most days it was the same. (37)

Nevertheless, just as in most of the statements in the novel, “the narrative voice plays with language so incessantly that it virtually parodies itself” (Ames 400). The dialogic depth of this description lies in the fact that it stems from Gile's consciousness and Woolf's agenda, and Woolf is ambiguous as to whether this repetition is *all* bad. Her position on continuity in *Between the Acts* is more ambivalent than a simple statement about monotony because the repetition of the everyday allows for a maintaining of life that war would otherwise destroy. It is the repetitive daily ritual that keeps the community going. As Gillian Beer states, the dispensing and receiving of tea, “and the accompanying phrases (“Sugar for you?”), are here the forms that ritual takes, producing surface and depths alike” as “the community steadies itself through humdrum repetition, whose significance is in saying things again, more than in what is said. Saying things again implies that you are still there to say them” (129). Woolf struggles with these ideas because, while “the community typifies the attitudes that have brought the country to the brink of war and fascism,” “neither does the novel suggest any value in the community's possible obliteration” (Beer 130).

Unfortunately, without change or growth in thought, the road toward war is firmly cemented. Although Giles and Isa demonstrate separateness and the breakdown of communication, Isa, like her husband, finds the repetition unbearable. She is frustrated

that nothing changes following each yearly pageant: “Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was – one or the other” (16). And like her husband, whose outrage is affected by the masculine role he is playing, Isa’s feelings about continuity are affected by the role she plays and her position within the community. In *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, Jane Marcus argues that “Isa is a prisoner in her father-in-law’s home. She is Irish and subject, like Ireland to England, to that old colonial tyrant, Bart Oliver...Isa and the other wives of England are recolonized, resubjugated by war” (94). Woolf uses the fragmented characters as representatives of very specific aspects of English culture, and all are connected to the fascism of the home front.

For Isa, the symbol of fascism at home is what she reads in the paper about English soldiers raping a girl in the barracks. Because, as Marcus asserts, Isa is a prisoner of English patriarchy, she feels a deep connection to the girl and sees the connection between the violence at home, fascism abroad, and the coming of war. Her memory is repeatedly invaded by what she has read: “That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face” (15). Isa’s association with the rape is interrupted when Lucy enters carrying a hammer, but the connection between home, war, and violence is made again shortly after when Woolf conflates Lucy’s hammer and the specifics of the rape. Although mentioned separately from the explicit description of the news article

paragraphs before, the line “The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer” (16) is an obvious reference back to the story of the rape. Furthermore, contributing to the dialogism and intertextuality of the novel, rape is alluded to through the repeated image of the nightingale and swallows. Several lines are quoted from Swinburne’s “Itylus,” a poem about the rape of Philomela, whose tongue is cut out to ensure her silence. Like the tapestry of allusions in *Between the Acts*, Philomela’s own story is told through her weaving a tapestry of truth. These references to Philomela symbolize Isa’s own feeling of isolation as she often falls into silence. She creates poems in her head that no one will hear, and her alienation is heightened by the lack of understanding between herself and her ill-tempered husband.

In contrast to his wife, as a representative of the young, angry inheritor of war, Giles does not see, or refuses to see, the violence within England and is more concerned with the violence across the channel. This narrow-mindedness allows him to feel a righteous, patriotic indignation and anger toward the foreign other. The young Englishman is enraged because he must change clothes for the pageant. In his mind, such frivolous activities do not respect the gravity of the approaching war: “Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in the flat land which divided them from the continent?” (32). What Giles does not see is the imprisonment happening in his own homeland, where people like Isa close themselves away from one another so as to not face the inevitable misunderstandings amongst each other. Isa and Giles are painted as complete opposites, and their fragmented marriage is representative of the gendered fragmentation caused by

patriarchy. While Giles, as a beneficiary of the hierarchy, does not see his complicity in the creation of war, Isa feels his complicity and her own subjugation.

Playing her role as only she knows how, Isa is not completely innocent and contributes to patriarchal divisions with her overly-feminized romanticism, a romanticism that often pushes Giles into his various categories. Isa is all poetry and cliché with her emphasis on romantic love, her collage of random quotations, and predictable wife-speak: “He is my husband.... The father of my children” (*BA* 33). However, her statement is tinged with irony and bitterness because she applies it to Giles after he has returned from what the reader can only presume is a romantic interlude with the stereotypically over-sexed Mrs. Manresa. Instead of facing reality, Isa welcomes a kind of passivity in her random appropriation of literature, conventions and unfulfilled (and probably imagined) love for Rupert Haines. Giles, on the other hand, is over-civilized in his masculine, rigid prose, veneer of heroism, and desire to exhibit his power and might through active participation in war. Having to remain seated as part of the audience, a communal role he does not perform well, Giles becomes frustrated and feels that he is not himself because he is “manacled to a rock...and forced passively to behold indescribable horror” (41-2), this, of course, referring to the ever-present-future-war that also invades his thought. Because of Giles’ proclivity toward only the masculine, the overly-feminized Isa becomes unsettled by his look of anger and knocks over a coffee cup, the symbol of the domestic sphere to which she is relegated. The knocking over of the cup becomes symbolic of the destruction of the home and common place by its own people; both Giles and Isa are complicit in the upset and ‘knocking over’ of England.

One difference between husband and wife is that Isa does express feelings of guilt, a guilt that “hangs over all Woolf’s characters (some aware of its causes, some not)” (Phillips 223). She studies herself in the mirror – a mirror that is “three-fold” so that she can “see three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome face” (*BA* 10). She seems to be trying to come to terms with her own multiplicity but keeps falling back into her shallow romanticism and perfunctory quoting of literary texts. There are moments when she awakens from her characteristic trance, although it is difficult to discern whether or not she is fully aware of her feelings. When Isa walks into the stable yard, she looks around her at her natural surroundings and murmurs, “How I am burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions....That was the burden...laid on me in the cradle...what we must remember: what we would forget” (106). Unlike Giles, Isa has an awareness of England’s role in leading up to the current political crisis. She continues, “Always I hear corrupt murmurs, the chink of gold and metal....Hear not the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us” (107). These thoughts speak to an understanding of England’s complicity in leading its people astray for the acquisition of capital gain, or “gold and metal.”

Although the glories of war are left out of the pageant, war is ever-present in the everyday life depicted between the acts of the play, and no one is more greatly affected than Giles. In a more serious turn of the grotesque, he physically demonstrates his aggressive, violent power when he stomps on the symbolic snake unable to swallow the toad. Having had enough of the community and what he sees as its passivity, he goes in search for conquest. During his walk down the path, he remembers “the rules of the

game” and kicks a “barbaric stone,” a reference to England’s colonization abroad. He places symbolic value on each kick of the stone as it becomes representative of all that destabilizes a normative England: “The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third, himself (coward). And the fourth and the fifth and all the others were the same” (68). Anything that subverts the glories of patriarchy (overt-sexuality, sexual deviance in the form of William’s implied homosexuality, and passivity) becomes a scapegoat for Giles’ anger and frustration. Once he encounters the snake and toad, the reader witnesses an absurdly violent image: “The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round – a monstrous inversion” (69). Giles projects his own frustration at inaction, viewing the snake and toad as a perverted form of stalemate, but his violent action comes off as that of a petulant child: nothing has been gained in the violent act. The last thing Giles wants is indecision, even if that indecision involves whether or not to kill or be killed. Therefore, he takes it upon himself, like England, to enter the fight and stomps on the snake, thus killing both., and he literally wears his complicity in the form of the blood on his shoe.

Not to be alone in his absurdity and Woolf’s mocking, Giles’ father, Bartholomew, is the quintessential traditional nationalist who never ceases his fantasy of the better imperialist past. Unlike the new, unchecked anger of Giles, the inheritor of tradition, Bart’s violence is less physical and less obvious. As the English patriarch of the country house, Bart is only concerned with his past glories in the colonies and domineeringly torments those he deems inferior. He becomes angry with Isa for

interrupting his daydream about his colonial exploits with savages and guns because “she was – destroying youth and India” because memories of India and “old men in clubs, old men in rooms off Jermyn Street” are all Bart has left for any kind of national identity (13). Even his “foreign” Afghan hound, whom he dominates, reminds him of his former glory, but Woolf does not allow for easy nostalgia here. Bart is made ridiculous as he bawls, “Heel!...heel, you brute!,” and his grandson’s nurses, tongue-in-cheek, think to themselves, “It was impressive...the way an old boy of his age could still bawl and make a brute like that obey him” (9). Kathy Phillips speaks of the comic juxtaposition of Bart presently commanding nothing but a drooling Afghan hound, an image completely in line with the serio-comic carnival and the grotesque: “The thin flanks of the dog diminish the size of his conquest....To juxtapose Bart’s self-congratulation with the drool carries entertainment value.” What is important here is that, as Phillips states, “beyond entertainment, humor pushes readers to reevaluate incongruous details. When Bart’s memory of carrying a gun in India shows up next to a ‘blob of foam’ on the dog’s nostrils, the glory of Empire dissolves into froth” (Phillips xviii). Woolf’s image of Bart and his drooling hound subvert the traditional image of the grand retired imperialist that Bart wishes he still represented.

Bart Oliver is an example of the “conventional refuser of festivity” often found in carnivalesque fiction. Marshall describes this grouser character as: “usually a male who needs to be coaxed into a good humor, who mutters and mumbles to himself, who denies that he has had a good time, or who spends his time throwing around as many monkey wrenches as he can lay his hands on” (159). Of course, the other obvious “refuser of

festivity” is Bart’s son, Giles. The great irony is that these men “demand to be beguiled back into the society they rule” (159). With Bart, Woolf humorously mocks imperialist values. He is bitter that England’s time as the ‘great’ imperialist nation has come to an end, and he feels useless now that he can no longer fulfill his role as the powerful colonizer. Giles is full of anger and self-consciousness as a war looms and all he can do is participate in what he sees as the frivolous entertainments of the community. Woolf allows no ‘great men’ of action in her novel, and those who desire traditional ideas of action are left bitter and unfulfilled. Instead, Woolf places focus and importance on the mundane events of everyday life while reinventing culture and history. Similar to the argument implied in *Orlando, Between the Acts* illustrates how ‘real’ life isn’t what happens during the acts of plays depicting ‘great men’ or the English literary tradition; life is what happens ‘between the acts’ in and amongst the obscure and the commonplace.

The carnivalesque mockery of Bart’s privileging hierarchies and control over others continues in his ridiculous cruelty toward his grandson. Just before Bart yells at his dog, George had been lagging behind his nurses, entranced by a flower which:

blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling, of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. (8)

This image of George and the flower is a beautiful moment tucked within Woolf’s various criticisms and mockery. It is an example of one of Woolf’s “moments of being”

she recalls from her childhood in her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past.” Thinking back to the past, she remembers a moment of “non-being” and then “for no reason...a sudden violent shock” that she would remember for the rest of her life (*Moments of Being* 71). That moment was when she, like George, became fascinated by a flower:

I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; ‘That is the whole,’ I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. (*Moments of Being* 71)

The intensity of such a moment in the eyes and mind of the child uncover much of what Woolf’s philosophy is about. These are the moments in life that are important, the moments when a person sees his or her relationship to the world around one’s self and its connection to the inner workings of the mind. This is a moment of ‘greatness,’ not those action-packed moments upheld in the stories and histories of England’s past.

Sadly, George’s thoughts and inner awakening are rudely interrupted by Bart’s cruel attempt to frighten the child by jumping out from behind a tree with a newspaper folded in the shape of a snout. The simple, child-like delight he found in the flower is replaced by fear, and Bart, “rais[ing] himself, his veins swollen, his cheeks flushed” in anger thinks of the child as little more than a “cry-baby” (9,13). Dismissive of his grandson’s feelings, Bart saunters away to read the paper. It is apparent in this scene that Bart’s hardness and lack of empathy are part of the same social constructions that make him focus on his glory days servicing England and Empire. Boys were meant to grow up

tough, working toward lives of violence and action, not lives of quiet contemplation of their natural surroundings. Like *Orlando*, George has experienced one of the many rude awakenings he will experience in a highly segregated, gendered society where men should be manly and women are the ones who fall into fits of tears. And yet, Woolf needs no didacticism to convey her disapproval of this construction. The fact that Bart's actions and words are presented as ridiculously and needlessly cruel, her lessons come through the words on the page despite the appearance of ambiguity.

George is not alone in his separation from Bart. Bart also torments his sister, Lucy, by mocking her and denouncing her religion as mere superstition. In *Between the Acts*, the brother and sister are presented as sitting firmly in their oppositional places within the binary of rationality versus spirituality, as well as fragmentation versus unity. Lucy is often portrayed as the ridiculous old-timey figure by the other characters. Isa calls her a "dinosaur," Giles is frustrated at her naïveté and calls her an "old fogey," and the villagers call her "Batty" and "Old Flimsy." She could not be any more different from her brother, "for she belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists" (BA 81). Bart creates tension and, thus, fragmentation, and Lucy tries to find connections to and between everything around her. She feels one with the house, nature, history, and the other characters. As she takes in the view around her, she seems to be off "on a circular tour of the imagination – one making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves – all are one. If discordant, producing harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head" (119). This discordant harmony becomes the later cacophony of voices after the audience has seen themselves as fragments in the mirrors. The unveiling of "Ourselves,"

of the current state of English society, is jarring: “But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume...And only, too, in parts....That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair,” the audience cries after Miss La Trobe’s performance (125). But Woolf does not lean toward one or the other, instead arguing for unity and fragmentation to coexist. While Lucy and Bart are separated by their ideals, Woolf sets up the boundary between the two as permeable and fluid. She writes, “But, brother and sister, flesh and blood was not a barrier, but a mist. Nothing changed their affection; no argument; no fact; no truth. What she saw he didn’t; what he saw she didn’t – and so on, *ad infinitum*” (18). These two could have the possibility of complementing one another, of remaining separate entities within the unified whole of community, but in their current society they are stuck in a cycle of separateness.

Out of the two siblings, Lucy’s carnivalistic performance is that of the player who desires a unified present and future like how she imagines the past to have been. Her definition of Englishness is contained within her favorite reading, *An Outline of History*, which describes a time “when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one” (6-7). Her ancient example, ancient like how others view Lucy, is ironic because part of the present threat to England is that it is no longer an isolated island. As Julia Briggs argues, the invention of the airplane meant that England was now connected to the continent by technological means, and she directly connects this to Lucy’s reading of England’s history (86). England has no choice but to accept its connection to others, but before England can live in unified peace and without feelings of

threat from abroad, England must change its own ideals of conquest and nationhood from within.

In *Between the Acts*, the atmosphere surrounding the pageant is one that reflects the comedy and absurdity found in the pageant itself. While it might not be the Rabelaisian carnivalesque that is obvious in its grotesquery, what happens between the acts of the play further allows for a disruption in the stable order, and this instability is reflected in the everyday thoughts and actions of the villagers beyond the actions of the play. Moreover, because the villagers are both the actors and the audience, the pageant “abolishes the distinction between spectator and performer” (Herrmann 16). This pertains to the literal sense in that the audience members participate in the play, particularly during the final act, but it is also meant in the figurative sense as the reader begins to see that the audience members also play their ‘roles’ between the acts of the play. That said, it takes a certain kind of figure, an outsider-artist type to bring the people together to face the fragmented roles they play. The sole person to attempt real change and awareness in the villagers is the mysterious playwright, Miss La Trobe. The idea of the Outsider as questioner and critic is an important aspect to understanding the performative role La Trobe plays during the village pageant. She is an outsider on all accounts. She is a foreigner, a lesbian, an artist, and a woman. She further complicates ‘womanness’ because her androgynous physicality contains stereotypically masculine traits: “Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set, strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language – perhaps, then, she wasn’t altogether a lady?” (BA 40). La

Trobe comes off as domineering in her assertiveness, masculine in her strength, and it takes this subversive outsider to show England the problems within that will inevitably lead to its destruction if change is not made.

Nonetheless, Miss La Trobe is a complicated, ambiguous character, and critics disagree as to what exactly *her* role is in the course of the novel. Being the artist, her endeavor is to force a kind of unity that is, perhaps, dangerous or misguided. De Gay sees her as a representation of the 1930s political poet, standing “in the attitude proper to an Admiral on his quarter deck” (190-1). She recalls Woolf’s 1940 essay “The Leaning Tower,” in which Woolf explains how the atmosphere of the 1930s forced the poet to be a politician. This atmosphere is described in Samuel Hynes’ *The Auden Generation*, which explains how, during a time of war and political crisis, the world of the poet could no longer remain private. Whether writers were reacting to the politics of the time or not, the reading public were projecting their own fears, anxieties, and beliefs about the times onto whatever they were reading, too. Other critics have seen a sort of fascism in Woolf’s characterization of La Trobe as she and her gramophone keep the community entranced, thus problematizing the concept of unity that so many wish to find in the novel. Patricia Joplin argues that Miss La Trobe represents the author-as-tyrant because she tries to bend the audience to her will, but admits that “in her finer moments, Woolf’s playwright becomes the author as anti-fascist” when she “celebrates the intrusion of nature’s wild and uncontrollable whims to counter the fixity of social behavior” and “stops resisting the freedom of the wind, the rain, the instincts of the grazing animals, she treats meaning as shared, as mutually generated by author, players, and audience (90).

As the stereotypical artist, Miss La Trobe would like to have control over her art and for the audience to be on board with her aims, but much of the meaning is left to their own making. She presents literary history in a way that is not didactic – unless the didacticism in the play is satirical and meant to be questioned.

Similar to Joplin’s reservations about Miss La Trobe, De Gay insists that the novel illustrates the dangers of unity, particularly exploring the ethical responsibility of the artist who “seek[s] to create social cohesion at a time when social order and conformity were being championed by totalitarian states on both the right and left” (199). This concern is expressed in *Three Guineas* when Woolf writes:

Even here, even now your letter tempts us to shut our ears to these little facts, these trivial details, to listen not to the bark of the guns and the bray of the gramophones but to the voices of the poets answering each other, assuring us of a unity that rubs out divisions as if they were chalk marks only; to discuss with you the capacity of the human spirit, to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity. But that would be a dream.... (365)

When applying this concern and the concerns of critics who see danger in Miss La Trobe’s method to *Between the Acts*, it becomes apparent that Woolf’s novel satirizes *all* conventions, including the traditional Romantic view of the role of the artist and literature as a means of bringing people together through the personal experience or beliefs of the artist. Instead, just as Caughie supports, a postmodern understanding of the artist’s role offers a compromise: in the final scene, La Trobe shows she is no fascist by bringing together the audience but giving them room to create their own meaning. The coercion and declaration found in political propaganda has been replaced with the ambiguous

image of the mirrors. These mirrors “revis[e] the romantic tropes of harmony...to propose a new aesthetic which can deal with contradictions and fragmentation” (de Gay 199). The mirrors symbolize the ability for the audience to see themselves reflected as both community and individual in that they reflect multiplicity – it is not one continuous mirror but fragments, fragments also showing that each member has been brought together for the pageant. The same can be said of the literary tradition in which Woolf’s parodies and satirizes. Each quotation and allusion is shared amongst the villages, and none hold primacy over another. Moreover, because of faulty memories and interruptions, none of the quotations are able to stand alone as solid exemplars of a stable past literary tradition. Each quotation and reference is distorted or reinvented, and all permanency is tossed aside in favor of a dialogic relationship between the literary past and the present use of the tradition.

Between the Acts is a particularly difficult novel, perhaps able to be ranked alongside her other highly experimental-poetical work, *The Waves*. Although the form seems straightforward and the plot chronological, there is an open-endedness and choppy quality that has plagued critics ever since the novel was first published. In a biting 1942 review of *Between the Acts* F. R. Leavis criticizes Virginia Woolf’s last novel, calling it “extraordinarily vacant” and “pointless” with “the apparent absence of concern for any appearance of grasp or point” (97). Kristeva explains how the modern bourgeoisie had embraced the realist, monologic novel while declaring the Menippean dialogic novel “unreadable” (55). The ambivalence and open-endedness of the Menippean dialogic novel leaves readers who want objective facts and accounts confused, thus creating the

dilemma that Woolf's final novel encountered upon its publication. Pamela Caughie argues that Woolf's novels benefit from a postmodern reading, and this aligns with the metafictional qualities open for exploration in her work. Woolf does, indeed, "interrogate the limits of realism" (Greene 3), and she does so in a way shared by other women writers of experimental fiction. Although the argument may be made that both men and women writers have written experimental fiction and play with language, Regina Barreca sees experiment and play as "a consistent pattern in women's writings and typical of women's comedic texts" (18), and I add that this experimentation is also a direct challenge to the tradition of literary realism and objectivity, an issue I will discuss in greater detail in chapter five.

However, *Between the Acts* not only calls into question the primacy of literary realism: modernism, too, is challenged by Woolf's postmodern refusal to accept any totalizing or consistent reading of culture or reality, including the modernist tendency to elevate the artist and art onto a higher plane of authenticity and autonomy. As Pamela Caughie expounds, Woolf's fiction challenged "the assumptions that the artist is a special and self-sufficient individual, that the artwork is original and autonomous, and that art is a means of providing order or revealing truth" (30). In contrast to modernist readings of Woolf focused solely on her experimentalism, reading Woolf as satire better allows us to see her art as questioning the 'givens' of all established forms. Instead of realism's attempt to objectively describe reality or modernism's attempt to accurately reflect the chaos or banality of real life through experimentalism, Woolf's *Between the Acts* is an attempt at showing *how* we generally *read* an age and emulate what we have interpreted.

By focusing on the 'hows,' Woolf's fiction becomes process oriented instead of an attempt at finding a stable truth in the modern age – something often associated with modernist techniques. By focusing on process and how ideologies are constructed, Woolf complicates our tendency to create stable oppositions such as male/female, past/present, and fact/fiction. As Caughie puts it:

Seeking out and acknowledging the doubts and difficulties of the creative process and the instabilities of literary tradition...enables differences to emerge and enables us to question their effects, without establishing another tradition... Rather, the point...is to introduce into the concept of tradition the concept of change, of instability. Thinking of the literary tradition as homogenous and authoritative leads the modernist writers...to assert their difference from the past and to adopt the language of liberation, transcendence, and novelty. (Caughie 45)

The very important role of the woman writer is to break this sequence so as to effect actual change instead of replacing one tradition with another.

Virginia Woolf leaves her final novel open-ended, breaking the sequence of final truths or any stable understanding of her relationship to the literary tradition that preceded her. The image of carnival continues with yet another play inside a play. The villagers have left Miss La Trobe's pageant confused and unsure of her meaning or what they should or should not have taken from the acts, particularly that final act entitled "the Present Time. Ourselves." Bombarded by a cacophony of voices, nature's interruptions, and the repeated noise of the gramophone calling out "dispersed are we," they leave to go back to their everyday lives while Miss La Trobe drowns her sorrows at her perceived failure in the local pub. Yet another scene appears to open as Giles and Isa now face each other to act out another evening together: the show must go on, and we are left

unsure as whether or not there will be birth and renewal from this final act. Her use of carnival to disrupt easy, stable readings or understandings. As Denise Marshall states, “The ‘well-made play’...disintegrates” (170). In feminizing the carnivalesque, Woolf again breaks conventions by subverting them, and the play, along with what happens outside of the play, is made to be one big joke. But this joke is not simply fun and games. Everything is made ridiculous, and the only thing that contains any ‘truth’ is that the very serious idea that the ‘insignificant’ moments outside of history are just as significant as anything or anyone else. All hierarchies and conventions crumble, leaving behind a heap of confusion, ambiguity, and fragments. The tragedy lies in the focus on systems of power that have contributed to the current state of war, violence, alienation, and the separation between the sexes; however, the open-endedness of the final act leaves room for change. It is yet another act being written into the tradition, but it, too, can be reinvented. With repetition comes deviation. For now, the characters are stuck in their roles within the typical narrative, but because Woolf has made the artistry transparent, we see that this narrative can still be rewritten.

CHAPTER V

CONFRONTING ‘SHEER FLAPDOODLE’: THE EQUALIZING FORCE OF MIDDLEBROW COMEDIC SATIRE AND STELLA GIBBONS’ *COLD COMFORT FARM*

The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.... If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me “middlebrow” I will take my pen and stab him, dead.

- Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow”

In the spirit of Menippean satire and its association with the carnivalesque, Stella Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm* is, without a doubt, the clearest example of comedic literary parody within this collection of twentieth century women satirical writers. Once snubbed by critics and academics, her fantastically funny, exceedingly popular novel has stood the test of time with recent scholarship, publishers, and even film directors calling attention to the masterful wit and humor found within the novel – an amazing feat for a work that had been dismissed by academics until only a few years ago due to its status as middlebrow, popular fiction. Despite a bevy of fans, including scholars and critics, it took half a century before essays and books with chapters dedicated to analysis of the novel began to appear. And there still is not much serious critical attention paid to *Cold Comfort Farm*. The novel was simply too popular with middleclass writers during its time of publication in 1932. It was too popular and too funny, thus burying the novel

within the derogatory categories of women's, popular, and the dreaded 'middlebrow' fiction. With the current renewed interest in middlebrow fiction and popular culture, Gibbons's most loved novel joins the ranks of rediscovered women's writing of the interwar period.

I have purposefully, and not without a bit of humor, followed Virginia Woolf's subversive satire with that of Gibbons in order to both juxtapose their works and show the commonalities between two very different women writers. Although contemporaries with common goals, Woolf and Gibbons are often viewed in light of their conflicting allegiances and disdain for what the other represented. Woolf, herself a modernist Bloomsburian and exemplar of the literary avant garde, has been charged with being overly difficult and exclusionary in her highbrow elitism, experimentalism and intellectualism – characteristics explicitly under attack in Gibbons's novel in the form of pigheaded Lawrencian postulants such as Mr. Mybug and ridiculous theatrical performances that are more experimental than enjoyable. Woolf's statement against middlebrow literature does little to challenge these claims of elitism, albeit the argument may be made that Woolf was being defensive as a woman writer who had also been lumped into a feminized category of fiction herself.¹ Stella Gibbons, on the other hand, wrestled with the same ideas as Woolf concerning literary hierarchies, the tradition, and where women fit within this tradition, but she did so in an unapologetically humorous

¹ In a 1932 review for the *Evening Standard* of Woolf's *The Second Common Reader*, the English novelist and critic J. B. Priestley criticized her works as meant for an audience of "terrifically sensitive, cultured, invalidish ladies with private means" ("Men, Women and Books: Tell Us More About These Authors!" *Evening Standard*. October 13, 1932: 11)

and accessible way, proudly embracing her modern journalistic pragmatism and matter-of-fact delivery while skewering snobbish intellectualism and what she saw as the absurdity of the modernist avant garde. Both the comparison and contrast between their novels make for an appropriately ironic and humorous examination of women's satirical strategies and purpose.

In addition to focusing on the middlebrow and how Gibbons adopts its methods in her parodic novel, this chapter aims to show how Bakhtin's understandings of comedy and parody are made more complicated in an overtly parodic work that both challenges and celebrates English literary culture. While many writers like Woolf incorporate snippets of other works, imitating various styles and creating a pastiche of the literary tradition, Gibbons' entire novel is an extended parody of nineteenth and twentieth century literary culture, playfully mocking the middlebrow yet using a modern middlebrow attitude to attack the highbrow. *Cold Comfort Farm* appropriates popular literary trends such as nineteenth century romance and the gothic, as well as twentieth century trends of rural fiction and modernism, often blending high literary style with popular literature and contemporary culture. It is this middlebrow blending of cultures and the use of what Bakhtin calls "carnival laughter" that create an equalizing force in the novel, and in its use of parody, competing voices and imitated works are revised by a modern practicality associated with the middlebrow. Unlike the harsher criticisms set forth by Woolf's *Between the Acts*, Gibbons simultaneously celebrates literary culture while playfully mocking worn-out trends, literary clichés, and its history of exclusivity, and does so in an accessible manner, thereby supporting a more inclusive dialogue

between readers of popular fiction and high literature. The parody of highbrow art in *Cold Comfort Farm* creates a dialogic space in which those works deemed ‘classics’ are interrogated and refigured through the lens of middlebrow culture, thus breaking with the homogeneity of a literary tradition that has historically supported strict categories of literature based on elitist attitudes toward class, gender, and mass culture.

Cold Comfort Farm serves as an example of how women writers, particularly those of comedic fiction, were often marginalized and relegated to stigmatized categories of popular fiction and the ‘middlebrow’; however, Gibbons’ parodic work complicates any easy categorization, which is a common trait of satirical fiction as a whole. Although popular and accessible, much of the meaning within the novel can only be understood by a reader well versed in both popular middlebrow and highbrow literature. Gibbons makes solid use of the sensationalist ‘flapdoodle’ produced by the rural novelist Mary Webb, but she also mocks high literary styles and plot conventions, imitating that of D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, and Virginia Woolf. As a work of satire, *Cold Comfort Farm* not only playfully mocks over-used genre conventions found in the middlebrow rural novels of the time but upholds that which it parodies, saving its harshest criticism for those elitist highbrows who claim art and literature as their own domain and dismiss middlebrow literature as feminine, status-seeking, and ultimately unimportant in its mass appeal. No matter the height of the brow, so to speak, the novel makes its attack, and neither popular novels nor high literature ‘flapdoodle’ are safe from mockery. Nonetheless, Gibbons’ allegiances are more in line with a women’s literary tradition that includes writers that could have once been thought of as ‘middlebrow’ during the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but whose works had become literary classics by the 1930s, including such writers as Jane Austen and the Brontës, due to their readership primarily consisting of women.²

Gibbons was particularly a fan of Jane Austen, and Flora, the novel's protagonist, acts as a playful parody of the practical Austen heroine: much like Austen's Emma, Flora intends to tidy-up Cold Comfort, meddling in her relations's lives for her own pleasure, and all actions hinge on this meddling. Otherwise, without Flora's boredom and meddlesome nature, the Starkadders and *Cold Comfort Farm* would remain stagnant. Fundamentally, Flora is the writer-figure of the novel (she tells her friend, Mrs Smiling, that she hopes to write a novel while at the farm), and it is through her perspective that the constructedness of literary convention is demystified for the reader. As Faye Hammill notes, Flora effectively "rewrites the plot of [the Starkadders's] lives, arranging each character's destiny exactly as a novelist would" (156). Gibbons champions the feminist practicality and anti-sentimentality in the tradition of Jane Austen, and she eviscerates the sexist, hierarchical traditions that her contemporaries refuse to let die. By using parody to fuse middlebrow literature with highbrow and only slightly exaggerating highbrow literary styles for comic effect, Gibbons knocks high culture down a peg or two, thereby leveling (and democratizing) the literary playing field.

² While the term *middlebrow* was not used until 1925, some classics predating this time may be viewed as epitomizing the concept due to their popularity, success within the literary marketplace, lack of critical attention, and generally middleclass female (or *feminized*) readership – all characteristics of middlebrow literature.

In a response to Rebecca O'Rourke's "Summer Reading" guide included in the *Feminist Review*, Rosalind Coward dismisses the satirical importance of *Cold Comfort Farm* in relation to women's writing and feminism. She claims that while the novel is "delightful" and by a woman writer, it "surely belongs more properly to the tradition of right-wing humorists like Nancy Mitford than to a nebulous tradition of 'women's writing' which is supposed to be of interest to feminists" (56). Such has been the charge against many women writers whose works are not overtly political or demonstrative of some obvious tenet of feminism, thereby supporting the view that satire is conservative in nature and that all light comedy by women is simply a show of pretty wit. Maroula Joannou supports the idea that much of the writing of the 1930s "remained solidly conservative in its structures and feeling, especially writers of popular and middlebrow fiction such as P.G. Wodehouse and even some women writers such as Ivy Compton-Burnett" (8). However, if we consider the recent scholarship on women's comedy and its political significance, as well as the original "Summer Reading" article from the *Feminist Review*, it becomes clear that O'Rourke's inclusion of *Cold Comfort Farm* in a feminist reading list is more than appropriate. O'Rourke affirms in her summer reading list that, as a comedic work of satire, *Cold Comfort Farm* only playfully mocks "the rural school" of popular fiction and saves its strongest attacks for "the idea of literature" and the obsession with male sexuality as tied to the landscape, which can be found in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Full of pathetic fallacy, hypersexualized nature, and snippets of psychoanalytic babble, these passages would be obvious enough for a reader of Lawrence, but, just to add to the satiric quality of Gibbons's parody, she literally marks

these moments of high literary style with her satiric Baedeker system for, as she states in her mock dedication, those who “not unlike [herself]...work in the vulgar and meaningless bustle of offices, shops and homes, and who are not always sure whether a sentence is Literature or whether it is just sheer flapdoodle” (*Cold Comfort Farm* 6).

For instance, one three-star passage that obviously imitates the sort of “blood-consciousness” and male sexuality advocated by Lawrence can be found when Adam Lambsbreath fetches Flora from the train station. In the style of the melodramatic inhabitants of *Cold Comfort*, the narrator describes the scene and its psychological connection to Adam’s mood, a style and theme favored by Lawrence:

From the stubborn interwoven strata of his sub-conscious, thought seeped up into his dim conscious; not as an integral part of that consciousness, but more as an impalpable emanation, a crepuscular addition, from the unsleeping life in the restless trees and fields surrounding him. The country for miles, under the blanket of the dark which brought no peace, was in its annual tortured ferment of spring growth; worm jarred with worm and seed with seed. Frond leapt on root and hare on hare. Beetle and finch-fly were not spared. The trout-sperm in the muddy hollow under Nettle Fritch Weir were agitated, and well they might be. The long screams of the hunting owls tore across the night, scarlet lines on black. In the pauses, every ten minutes, they mated. (*Cold Comfort Farm* 45)

In the comically juxtapositional style present throughout the novel, Gibbons undermines this parodic highfaluting language with her straightforward style and the acknowledgment of writerly arrangement: “it seemed chaotic, but it was more methodically arranged than you might think” (45). With this statement, Gibbons’s parodied Lawrencian depictions of nature and consciousness fall from the pedestal of

high literature and into a puddle of ridiculousness, showing that much of this overwrought, pretentious style can, in fact, be laughingly labeled as ‘sheer flapdoodle.’

Regardless of the traditional view of satire as conservative as I discussed in chapter one, women writers of satire, particularly comedic satire, differ greatly from those within the masculine tradition. While masculine satire traditionally depends on mocking that which challenges the status quo in order to maintain social stability and supports a nostalgic view of a better past, women’s satire challenges the very status quo in which traditional satire upholds. Emily Toth explains this difference, arguing that women use “humane humor,” only ridiculing what can be changed and refraining from the use of the typical scapegoat. Rather, “women humorists attack – or subvert – the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations” (783). Regina Barreca adds to this understanding by asserting that the “directing [of] the comedic vision in all its forms – irony, puns, repartee, irreverence and sarcasm – towards those arrogantly occupying positions of power” is specifically a “hallmark of women’s humor” (*Untamed and Unabashed* 22).

In the introduction to *Last Laughs*, Barreca cites J.B. Priestley’s sexist allegation that the “sort of humour essentially feminine in nature” is “soft laughter and smiles...soon dissolv[ing] into tears” (4). As a contemporary of both Gibbons and Woolf, Priestley’s attitude toward women’s comedy shows the significance of a work such as *Cold Comfort Farm* in a sea of comedies written by men that are typically discussed as important works of literature, including satirical works by Evelyn Waugh, and why *Cold Comfort Farm* should be included in feminist discussions of women’s

satire and comedy. It seems to be less a problem of the comedic writer herself and more a problem of her work being misread. As Barreca states, “comedy written by women is perceived by many critics as trivial, silly and unworthy of serious attention” (“Introduction” 6), and any focus placed on the domestic or other trivialized interests of women is in danger of being labeled as “delightful” yet unimportant. This is the plight of any work deemed ‘middlebrow,’ especially when written by a woman and comedic in purpose.

There has been a growing interest in the middlebrow and literary works critics label as such in the past decade. Nicola Humble outlines this new critical reevaluation, supporting the idea that it has been ignored due to both its popularity from the 1920s into the 1950s and its having been “largely written and consumed by women” (1-2). According to Faye Hammill, popular novels by women “on first publication...were received as significant contributions to high culture,” yet “later their high sales led to their reclassification as commercial fiction” (3). It is this fear of the commodification of art that drew criticism from the literary elite, including writers such as Woolf but certainly not limited to those highbrow authors. Culture critics ignited the ‘battle of the brows’ through their attempts to classify and create hierarchies, dividing that which was educated and difficult from what was viewed as more accessible to the public. Q. D. Leavis characterizes middlebrow writers as “respected middling novelists of blameless intentions and indubitable skills” who leave their readers “with the agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue” (36-7). Implied in her statement

is the literary laziness of the middlebrow reader who attempts to find easily digestible bits and pieces of highbrow art hidden within easily available texts.

The style of middlebrow fiction typically contrasted greatly from the more respected highbrow literature of modernism and postmodernism due to its “restrained, realist prose style,” preoccupation with women’s lives, and its association with mass culture (Hammill 4-5). The term ‘middlebrow’ joined the lexicon of twentieth century literary and culture critics after a 1925 article in the satirical *Punch* magazine described this new literary trend: “The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow.’ It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like” (qtd in Brown and Grover 4). Just as Woolf’s comments about the middlebrow are derogatory, the sarcasm is apparent in the article’s assessment of the purpose for the middlebrow and its catering to the masses who cannot comprehend actual highbrow literature but who want to feel erudite and cultured.

Ina Habermann further explains why the middlebrow was relegated to the margins of literary culture:

‘Highbrow’ came to denote intellectualism and high achievement in art, while ‘lowbrow’ signifies unsophisticated taste and a preference for formulaic entertainment that does not greatly challenge the consumer’s intellect. The term ‘middlebrow’ was extrapolated from these two concepts in the late 1920s in the context of the growth of mass culture...and the expansion and diversification of the market for printed matter. (32)

What is important to note here is the fact that even the ‘lowbrow,’ that of so-called “unsophisticated taste,” was given more respect than that “middling” group, as Woolf

called the middlebrow, who, to writers such as herself, tried to appear more artistic, learned, and sophisticated than they actually were. With its association with mass culture and accessibility, middlebrow culture became the bogey for those fearful of the vulgarization of high culture and high culture's exclusive status.

Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer give a brief historical account of how the avant garde worked its way to the top tier of literary culture during the early part of the twentieth century. Regardless of the tastes of the masses, who deemed the experimentalism of the first two decades unsavory and quite vulgar in its challenge to realist art, the avant garde quickly "moved from marginality to assume mainstream intellectual validity," producing the effect that anything not 'highbrow' "became excluded from increasingly influential critical approval" (2). Thus, "works of an advanced and experimental nature were awarded a cultural value far greater than those which were not avant garde, whose authors were assumed to have inadequately middling literary aspirations or a mediocre quality of readers" (Macdonald and Singer 2). Although the trend was that of divisiveness, specifically of literary critics creating a dichotomy between that which was popular and that labeled avant garde, middlebrow culture, in its mass appeal and accessibility, created a common area for a diverse readership. As Macdonald and Singer affirm, "middlebrow reading was available to all, and highly productive authors, such as H G Wells, could deliver novels for readers from all three areas on the cultural continuum" (3). The popularity of the middlebrow may be attributed to the inaccessibility of those experimentalists of the avant garde. With audiences who were "unable to stomach Stravinsky" and who "remained loyal to

nineteenth-century romanticism,” as well as readers who, “finding Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence hard to take, sought the continuance of nineteenth century realism,” the middlebrow became a way for the mass readership to enjoy the standard fare with a mix of what they considered high art (Baxendale and Pauling 49). This sort of middle-ground approach further contributed to accusations that middlebrow literature was simply escapism masked in a higher literary style.

Moreover, with middlebrow literature being produced and consumed primarily by women, middlebrow literary culture itself became feminized, even while intermodern men such as the satirist Evelyn Waugh were also writing popular novels that did not fit so neatly into any particular category and were read by various audiences (Brown and Grover 10). This feminization of the middlebrow was not simply a gendered classification based on the writers and readership but one that assumed an inferior, degraded status for the middlebrow within the literary culture wars. Historically, men have been connected to the elite and exclusionary literature of, for example, modernism in the twentieth century, while women have been associated with popular literature connected to mass culture and consumerism. Because of this feminization of the middlebrow, it was considered unworthy of scholarly attention and lacking the seriousness of purpose of highbrow literature. However, new scholarship attempts to redefine the term ‘middlebrow’ as “an effective critical category for the consideration of interwar literature” (Hammill 6).

Instead of dismissing an entire grouping of literature as overly-accessible or ‘pandering’ to mass culture, middlebrow literature should be viewed as offering a

legitimate alternative to both high modernism *and* popular culture, for, as I have stated, many so-called ‘middlebrow’ novels are difficult to categorize and often use a mix of both. Imitative and performative in nature, the middlebrow allows women writers to juxtapose different genres and trends in order to call into question the exclusivity and pretentiousness of the male dominated literary establishment. And, as Judy Suh supports, a parodic middlebrow work such as *Cold Comfort Farm* is in line with feminism because of this attempt at destabilizing rigid categories, particularly by targeting those who go against “middlebrow values of ordinariness and progress” (140).

The moment when Flora introduces Meriam, the servant girl who gives birth each spring, to birth control certainly illustrates what a middlebrow readership would see as a humorous jab at the absurd depictions of women in literature, as well as poking fun at conservative, outdated views on women’s bodies and reproductive rights. These mostly women readers would support the middlebrow progressive values championed by our protagonist, who refuses to sensationalize the everyday and commonplace. Meriam bemoans her yearly condition and the burden it places upon her, lamenting, “Haven’t I enough to bear, wi’ three children to find food for, and me mother lookin’ after a fourth? And who’s to know what will happen to me when the sukebind is out in the hedges again and I feels so strange on the long summer evenings—?” Flora challenges Meriam’s despondency with a simple retort that implies the power of the modern woman who takes control over her own body and situation:

‘Nothing will happen to you, if only you use your intelligence and see that it doesn’t’.... And carefully, in detail, in cool phrases, Flora explained exactly to

Meriam how to forestall the disastrous effect of too much sukebind and too many long summer evenings upon the female system. (69-70)

The middlebrow reader is in on the joke, smiling and nodding her head as a fellow modern woman of common sense and noting Flora's unemotional response to Meriam's horror at the idea of "flying in the face of nature." As Flora humorously puts it, "Nature is all very well in her place, but she must not be allowed to make things untidy" (70).

Just as what happens with the contemporary reference to birth control, cultures collide with the parodic characterization of Aunt Ada Doom and Flora's correct assumption that she is only playing the role prescribed to her through literary conventions. The women at Cold Comfort are trapped by their environment and dominated by the roles in which they represent and perform. Although not literally 'trapped' in the manner of Bertha from *Jane Eyre*, these women at Cold Comfort have become prisoners to these roles that keep them tied to the farm and nature. It is up to Gibbons and her middlebrow audience, one who is presented as having 'wised-up' to these clichés, to challenge these conventions and expectations so that the other meanings and 'realities' embedded within the text can come to light.

The matriarch of the Starkadder family, Aunt Ada Doom, takes on the one domestic role in which she can retain power, the "Dominant Grandmother Theme," as Flora calls it (Gibbons 57). Gibbons playfully mocks this convention, using Flora as her mouthpiece:

...found in all typical novels of agricultural life (and sometimes in novels of urban life, too). It was, of course, right and proper that Mrs. Starkadder should be

in possession at Cold Comfort; Flora should have suspected her existence from the beginning. (57)

Aunt Ada Doom's character also recalls the convention of the 'mad woman in the attic,' a nineteenth century literary convention famously discussed in great length by the feminist literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in relation to the angel-monster binary often used to represent women in literature. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, women writers of the nineteenth century often used themes of entrapment, madness, and anger in order to project their own disillusionment with women's roles within patriarchal constructs (85). Gibbons uses this tradition of women's writing to playfully mock depictions of women's madness and hysteria, a convention that had been appropriated in the popular rural novels of the 1930s in the form of the "Dominant Grandmother Theme." She uses Flora as the guide to uncovering the truth that Aunt Ada Doom is, in fact, perfectly sane, aware, and in complete control of the goings-on at the farm.

Further blending cultures, Flora's practical findings merge contemporary allusions with these conventional literary tropes. After having observed Aunt Ada's "firm chin, clear eyes" and "tight little mouth" and noticing her "close grip upon the 'Milk Producers' Weekly Bulletin and Cowkeepers' Guide,'" Flora concludes that "if Aunt Ada was Mad, then she, Flora, was one of the Marx Brothers" (171). Here, the reader is reminded of the contemporary space in which the novel takes place. This is no Victorian "mad woman in the attic," kept sheltered from modern popular culture; Aunt Ada is a woman who knows exactly what is going on in modern farming with her "Milk Producer's Weekly Bulletin and Cowkeepers' Guide," and if the reader was not jarred by

the bulletin's inclusion, then the juxtaposition of Aunt Ada's Victorian madness with the reference to popular culture in the form of the Marx Brothers should have the reader laughing at the absurd, out-dated depiction of Aunt Ada's madness. This same kind of juxtaposition between literary convention and popular culture occurs shortly before when Flora compares the gathering of Starkadders in the Cold Comfort kitchen to the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's, a humorous way of depicting the ghastly atmosphere after Flora has returned from the Hawk-monitor ball and attempts to "crack the social ice a bit" (170).

Along with Aunt Ada Doom, Judith Starkadder represents a confining, rather sexist literary construct. She performs the role of the obsessive mother as found in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. She, like Lawrence's Mrs. Morel, is haunted by her son's relationships with women, an obvious nod to Mrs. Morel's jealousy in *Sons and Lovers*. The reader is made to assume that it is Seth's own transgressions that have brought on Meriam's yearly confinements, and when Judith and Flora hear Meriam's cries from the barn, Judith is brought to melodramatics as she "seemed bowed under the gnawing weight of a sorrow that had left her too exhausted for anger; but, as she spoke, an asp-like gleam of contempt darted into her overlidded eyes" (64). Continuing the melodrama typical of the Starkadders, the narrator then presents a highly sexualized description of a photograph of Seth, creating even greater awkwardness surrounding Lawrence's portrayal of such strange, incestuous longing between mother and son whose "young man's limbs, sleek in their dark male pride, seemed to disdain the covering offered them by the brief shorts and striped jersey" with "his full, muscled throat, which rose, round

and proud, as the male organ of a flower, from the nick of his sweater” (64). Again, Gibbons is parodying the hyper-sexed style of Lawrence, which is immediately undercut by Flora’s matter-of-fact musings in response to Seth’s image: “He is a thought too fat, but really very handsome” (64). But the Lawrencian imagery continues after Judith condemns Seth as the shame of the family:

She stood up, and looked out into the drizzling rain. The cries from the little hut had stopped. An exhausted silence, brimmed with the enervating weakness which follows a stupendous effort, mounted from the stagnant air in the yard, like a miasma. All the surrounding surface of the countryside – the huddled Downs lost in rain, the wet fields fanged abruptly with flints, the leafless thorns thrust sideways by the eternal pawing of the wind, the lush breeding miles of meadow through which the lifeless river wandered – seemed to be folding inwards upon themselves. Their dumbness said: ‘Give up. There is no answer to the riddle; only that bodies return exhausted, hour by hour, minute by minute, to the all-forgiving and all-comprehending primaeval slime.’ (65)

Full of ridiculous pathetic fallacy, Gibbons marks this passage with two stars – not quite the three-star outpouring of other Lawrencian passages, but still a tongue-in-cheek moment of “fine” literature, in case her reader might read it as “sheer flapdoodle,” of course.

What is important about these moments of parody and mockery is the emphasis placed on the irreverence toward literary hierarchy, particularly a literary hierarchy condoning the cult of modernist masculinity and sexism as represented in highbrow writers such as D. H. Lawrence. It is through comedy, and what Bakhtin refers to as “carnival laughter,” that the equalizing force in the novel comes to light. Carnival laughter, the kind found in Menippean satire, is egalitarian, unlike the laughter of

superiority. In not taking itself too seriously, carnival laughter through parody shakes up the official language, leaving room for diverse voices and meanings and the questioning of the uniformity of thought. Comedy and parody add layers of meaning that can contradict that which is being referenced. About the importance of carnival laughter, Bakhtin writes that “the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint.... Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” (*Rabelais* 66). Laughter erupts from the collective body of society, and women’s comedy, especially when found in satire and parody, disrupts the literary pecking order.

Continuing her support of *Cold Comfort Farm* as a significant novel by a woman writer, O’Rourke vouches for the novel as “a rare item, a comic novel by a woman, which is guaranteed to succeed by its refusal to take anything, including itself, seriously” (12). What makes *Cold Comfort Farm* such a valuable contribution to feminist studies of women’s comedy and satire is exactly that: its refusal to take itself, as a work of literature, seriously. By doing so, Gibbons suggests that literature has, in fact, been taken too seriously instead of being enjoyed or played with for the sole purpose of pleasure or *jouissance*; it has been purposefully made difficult and convoluted in order to gain status within highbrow culture. As she explains in her humorous tongue-in-cheek dedicatory letter, Gibbons’s experience as a journalist had taught her to “say exactly what [she] meant in short sentences,” but, in order to write Literature, she had to “write as though [she] was not quite sure about what [she] meant but was jolly well going to say something all the same in sentences as long as possible” (*Cold Comfort Farm* 5-6).

Contrary to the battle-of-the-brows arguments attempting to maintain hierarchies and distinctions between low-, middle-, and highbrow art, Gibbons presents a hybrid novel that parodies all three, and in using parody as her weapon of choice, she ultimately reveals the importance of maintaining a women's practical, modern middlebrow attitude.

It is through parody that the “double-voicedness,” or dialogism, shines through in *Cold Comfort Farm*. Like Woolf, Gibbons imitates literary styles in order to poke holes in the belief that any one form could be superior to another, but she does so with a more inclusive, middlebrow approach. Since meaning is created through a collective body of voices in interaction with one another, Gibbons's use of oppositional styles, literary clichés, and other recognizable literary patterns simultaneously challenges the original meanings, supports original meanings, and creates new ones – all from different strata within the literary community. As Bakhtin writes, in order for a novel to express dialogism it “must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is, all the era's languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia” (Dialogic Imagination 111). With parody, the social and ideological voices include those of the past and those of contemporary culture, as well as the voice of the author. These multitudinous voices destabilize hierarchies in that voices from various cultures, including high culture and popular culture, are present within the same text, changing and adding meaning as these voices are presented.

Cold Comfort Farm is an example of how this kind of dialogic novel can work to break down barriers between voices and cultures. In order for these parodies to work and the humor to be effective, Gibbons must assume that the average, everyday reader has

had access to the original works being parodied, whether those works are the popular rural novels or those of high literary culture. It is this middlebrow readership that continues to build onto the meanings supplied by both Gibbons and the authors of the works she parodies. What happens is that the imaginary boundary between oppositional cultures is made porous as those who read highbrow and middlebrow literature get a chuckle when recognizing whatever literary mode is under attack. Suzanne Kehde makes this connection between the various voices within a novel and those contextual presences that further the creation of multiple meanings when she states, “the presence of many voices in the novel is due not only to their internalization on the part of the author but also to the cultural factors surrounding the novel’s long pre-history” (28). This directly applies to a novel like *Cold Comfort Farm* in that, although the literary history in which it refers is fairly recent, the culture of the nineteenth and into the early part of the twentieth century was one of rapid social change.

These social changes are evident in *Cold Comfort Farm* as popular culture and literary culture collide. Flora intervenes when confronted with the novelistic cliché of the ‘primitive’ woman tied to the earth in the form of the character Meriam. The narrator, tongue-in-cheek as always, describes her as “a creature who was as close to the earth as a bloomy greengage...and this greengage creature never had any bother with her confinements, but just took them in stride, as it were. Evidently, Meriam belonged in the greengage category” (69). Again, it is the narrator’s pragmatism, a voice obviously echoing the practicality of both the author and her heroine, Flora, that undercuts this worn-out literary tradition of the female-type connected to nature and the body. With

Austenian irony in phrases such as “as it were” and “evidently,” the narrative comically undermines systematic classification and shallow depictions often portrayed in literature, and Flora corrects this worn-out stereotype, insuring that Meriam will no longer be a slave to her literary classification. Here, the culture of the progressive woman of the 1930s, with Flora as its representative, defeats the sensationalistic novels preceding her.

Other seemingly simplified characterizations are made more complicated through the use of comic parody with the inevitable Gibbons undermining. Bakhtin argues that the dialogic nature of a novel rests in the relationship between the author and her point of view, the narrator, and the characters. The narrator, a character herself, is not always the voice of the author, just as “each character’s speech possesses its own belief system, since each is the speech of another in another’s language” (*Dialogic Imagination* 315). This relationship allows for contradictions and ironies to pluralize the meanings embedded within each speech act, and the diverse voices within this dialogic relationship not only encapsulate different languages and meanings but different worldviews from different social groups and cultures. Therefore, as M. Keith Booker asserts, “the dialogue in the novel thus dramatizes ideological struggles in the society as a whole” (3). Through parody, Gibbons illustrates the struggle between ‘reality’ and ‘reality’ as presented in fiction, and it is primarily through her characterizations where readers become aware of how shallow these types are typically drawn.

For instance, when we first meet Seth, the narrator portrays him as the stereotypical over-sexed Lawrencian figure with his sullen attitude, muscular body, and voice that “had a low, throaty, animal quality, a sneering warmth that wound a velvet

ribbon of sexuality over the outward coarseness of the man” (38). He sits “sprawling in the lusty pride of casual manhood,” and Gibbons cannot help herself from further humorous farce as she finishes “with a good many buttons and tapes undone” (39). When Meriam enters the room he “laughed insolently, triumphantly...[undoing] yet another button [of his shirt], and lounged away” (41). Seth meets his match with Flora who, adopting the practical, middlebrow blasé attitude that contrasts her from her country relatives, dismisses his attempts at shocking her with his masculine sexuality and sexist remarks. With another jab at Lawrence’s ‘blood consciousness’ and gendered constructions, Seth enacts the role of the typical Lawrencian misogynist: “Women are all alike – aye fussin’ over their fal-lals and bedazin’ a man’s eyes, when all they really want is man’s blood and his heart out of his body and his soul and his pride...” (82). Flora’s response rejects any power in his statement as she nonchalantly replies, “Really?” while “looking in her work-box for her scissors” (82). Continuing in his attempt to disquiet the detached Flora, Seth responds in the same Lawrencian style and rural dialect, something Gibbons’s parody allows her reader to see is just as constructed as the character himself:

“Ay.” His deep voice had jarring notes which were curiously blended into an animal harmony like the natural cries of stoat or teasel. “that’s all women want – a man’s life. Then when they’ve got him bound up in their fal-lals and bedazin’ ways and their softness, and he can’t move because of the longin’ for them as cries in his man’s blood...” (82)

Flora again answers calmly and dismissively, thinking to herself that she has known this type before, and, ironically, it is not from the country. Like many moments in the novel, Gibbons takes this opportunity to point out that the country is not all that different from

the city. Flora thinks to herself that she has already participated in this kind of discussion “at parties in Bloomsbury, as well as in drawing-rooms in Cheltenham,” though “in Cheltenham and in Bloomsbury gentlemen did not say in so many words that they ate women in self-defence, but there was no doubt that that was what they meant” (82-3). Once Seth discovers that Flora has had a bit of fun with him, we find out that what Seth truly loves is not being a rake but going to “the talkies” (83). This is when Gibbons makes it clear that the division between the country and the city had never really existed, even before Flora’s citified ways infiltrate the farm. Novelists have propagated the idea that the country is either backward or, if held from a nostalgic standpoint, innocent and pastoral. Seth’s issue with women has nothing to do with his masculine ‘blood consciousness’ or connection to nature; he hates that the women he has taken to the movies “worrited me in the middle of a talkie. Ay, they’re all the same. They must have yer blood and yer breath and ivery bit of yer time and yer thoughts. But I’m not like that. I just like the talkies” (147).

Another character who at first appears to be nothing but a rural literary stereotype is Elfine, the Brontë-esque sprite who is, in the words of Adam Lambsbreath, “as wild and shy as a Pharisee of the woods,” and, as Flora puts it, does “the startled bird stunt,” implying with “stunt” that it is simply an act (60). Reminiscent of Catherine from *Wuthering Heights*, Elfine flits here and there and appears to have no understanding of social protocol; however, Flora understands the type, thinking how if she does not intervene, “even if she escapes from [Cold Comfort], she will only go and keep a tea-room in Brighton and go all arty-and-crafty about the feet and waist” (61). Later in the

novel Flora, through logic and the application of her urban experiences with various artistic crowds, realizes that Elfine is, indeed, following the trendy nature-worship fashion of the bohemian set. Just as Flora pokes fun at the way the unconventional are, in fact, just as conventional as any other group bound up in their own rules, we find that Elfine has become a follower of the conventions illustrated by Miss Ashford who owned a tea house and wore smocks that Flora correctly guesses were “embroidered with holly hocks” and who “wore her hair in shells round her ears and a pendant made of hammered silver with a bit of blue enamel in the middle” and grew herbs (135). When Flora takes Elfine under her wing and declares that she will correct her behavior and style with the help of *Vogue* magazine, the reader realizes that one kind of performance is simply being replaced with another. And yet, even though we know that Flora is a meddler, a colonizer set out to ‘tidy up’ the Starkadders³, we can see that Flora’s goal here is one of practicality. It is not that Flora only cares about keeping up appearances but that she, like the modern new woman, must arm herself with variously created ‘selves’ in order to survive in diverse societies. Flora tells Elfine, “I tell you of these things in order that you may have some standards, within yourself, with which secretly to compare the many new facts and people you will meet if you enter a new life” (136). For Flora, this is simply a realistic portrayal of modern society and does not necessarily mean that Flora agrees with it. Either way, Gibbons has set up yet another example of how the city and its trends had

³ Not above Gibbons’s playful mockery, Flora’s takeover is directly tied to colonial discourse. She compares her first meeting the Starkadders with how “Columbus [must have] felt when the poor Indian fixed his solemn, unwavering gaze upon the great sailor’s face” and how “for the first time a Starkadder looked upon a civilized being” (49).

already affected the farm, that the characters were already playing their literary roles, and how these roles can quickly change once a dynamic force such as Flora, or any ‘novelist’ for that matter, comes into the picture.

By comically deconstructing the reader’s expectations about characters like Seth and Elfine, Gibbons not only allows for conventions and regressive types to break down but challenges the nostalgic depictions of characters and settings typically created in novels. The separation between the country and the city is an illusion, caving to the nostalgia for a better past or simpler time, which does not work for women writers who have been marginalized. For those women, modern progress works in their favor. And, as women writers of satire, using irony to refrain from falling into nostalgia for the past allows women to simultaneously insert themselves into the literary tradition while challenging the conservative views of satire as maintaining how things have always been done. Satire becomes a powerful tool in the hands of the woman writer, forcing open the door to literary inclusion yet making certain that her presence within the system does not perpetuate the old assumptions and practices that have been used to justify her exclusion.

In contrast, Gibbons’s contemporary, Evelyn Waugh, is a male writer of comedic satire of a similar style to that of Gibbons about whom much has been written and who could be labeled as ‘middlebrow’ for his darkly humorous works of satire, but his work is often nostalgic for what he saw as England’s great past. Interestingly, and ironically, it was speculated that the name “Stella Gibbons” was a pseudonym for Waugh; according to critics, it was obvious that *Cold Comfort Farm* was too witty to have been written by a woman (Hammill 172). Both situated within the hazy category of what Kristin Bluemel

refers to as *intermodernism* due to their use of non-canonical forms, neither Waugh nor Gibbons fits the experimentalism of modernism or postmodernism, nor the social realism that had grown in popularity in the 1930s. These two writers share similarities in their comedic and satiric interests, as well as their mass appeal, yet only Waugh has thrived within the literary canon. Part of the reason might be that Waugh better fits with the elitist attitude, anxiety of modernity, and nostalgia for the past so common within the highbrow literature of the time, and his version of satire is much more in line with that of the traditional sense that satire is meant to be conservative and uphold traditional moral standards.

Jonathan Greenberg expounds on this doubleness of satire and its ability to be both conservative and subversive, and his primary example of satire's conservatism is, in fact, Waugh. It is Waugh's conservatism, his "outspoken traditionalism," which "appears to reinforce his satiric ridicule of all that departs from age-old standards" (30). Waugh himself once stated:

Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogenous moral standards.... It is aimed at inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue. (385)

In a time when he felt society and its "homogenous moral standards" had disintegrated, Waugh believed that true satire had met its end during the twentieth century and expressed nostalgia for what he saw was a better, more noble past. This conservative critique of modernity is portrayed in most, if not all, of Waugh's novels. For example, in

Vile Bodies, he mocks what he calls the “Bright Young Things,” the younger generation depicting the aimlessness and decay of traditional English values. In *Brideshead Revisited*, the central focus is on Charles Ryder’s nostalgia for the English country house and the nobility’s greatness prior to their collapse following the Second World War. Many critics have seen this conservatism and propensity for nostalgia in Waugh. Christine Berberich explains that for Waugh, “the country house represented certain values in society: the moral worth of its inhabitants; wealth of history; admiration of the arts and all things beautiful” (52). Comparing Waugh’s vision of a modern wasteland to that of T.S. Eliot, Samuel Hynes sees a connection between the two in how “the emptiness of modern existence is ironically under-scored by reference to the magnificent visions of the past” (59). For Waugh, there is little opportunity for anything positive to come out of this newer generation of urbanites, and he mourns the stability he believes was once found in England.

In contrast, recent critics of satire have focused on the transformative qualities of twentieth century satire, which are more in line with how women writers use satire as a vehicle for change and new understandings. For example, referring to Menippean satire as “narrative satire,” Frank Palmeri affirms that narrative satire “parodies both the official voice of established beliefs and the discourse of its opponents,” and, therefore, it “interrogates any claims to systematic understanding of the world” (6). His conclusion is that narrative satire is “therefore less tied to a conservative cultural project and potentially more subversive” (6). Unlike Waugh, women writers such as Gibbons saw this breakdown and instability as a time of liberation and experimentation, using satire to

play with traditional social and literary constructions. With a focus on the comic subversion within womanist writing, Barreca explains that “while male writers were exploring their disturbance at the breakdown of traditional structures, women writers were expressing exuberance at precisely the same phenomena” (17). Not only were women writers able to comically play with worn out clichés but they challenged the idea that traditional structures as presented in literature ever existed in the first place. Although Waugh glorifies the country and the past, Gibbons perceives instability and the ‘breakdown’ of traditional values as more of an illusion created by writers than a reality, thereby parodying various literary genres to demystify the constructedness of the conventions and themes found therein.

Gibbons, a woman writer of comedy with middlebrow attitudes, fits within what Bluemel describes as the hazy area within mid-twentieth century writing that “deconstructs multiple binaries, not just the highbrow/lowbrow opposition...reshaping the ways we think about relations between elite and common, experimental and popular, urban and rural, masculine and feminine, abstract and realistic, colonial and colonized” (3), and she does so by using comedy to dislocate the literary conventions that become mistaken for ‘truths.’ Barreca accounts for this difference between masculine nostalgia and women’s anti-nostalgia:

without subverting the authority of her own writing by breaking down convention completely, the woman comic writer displays a different code of subversive thematics than her male counterparts. Her writing is characterized by the breaking of cultural and ideological frames. Her use of comedy is dislocating, anarchic and, paradoxically, unconventional. (“Introduction” 9-10)

Unfortunately for these “intermodern” women writers, they “tried to speak to and for community, in the language of the people, but thereby risked the period’s dismissive label of ‘middlebrow’” (Bluemel 12). This community and its people were growing ever more heterogenous, and Gibbons’s interplay between differing literary cultures, as well as her illustration of city versus country life, mocks the dichotomies often reinforced in literature. Waugh, in line with modernist classicism and anxiety, constructed the country as a symbol of England’s better past and the city as the corrupt reminder of the dangers of modernity. Gibbons’s constructed binary of country versus city, on the other hand, is ironic, tongue-in-cheek, and ultimately breaks down once the reader realizes that the country had been infiltrated all along. *Cold Comfort Farm* and the Starkadders who inhabit it are humorously portrayed as backward, irrational, and out-dated versus the practicality and freedom of the city and its inhabitants, but there is constant movement between the two even before Flora’s arrival at the farm.

In *The Country and the City*, the culture critic Raymond Williams briefly mentions the interplay of the country and the city as portrayed in *Cold Comfort Farm*, especially in relation to the mythology of their separation that writers have advanced in their literary works. According to Williams, the early part of the twentieth century saw the country, specifically a working country, transforming into a place representing physical and spiritual regeneration. It had become “the teeming life of an isolated nature, or the seasonal rhythm of the fundamental life processes,” contrasting with the associations of the city as the place of “mechanical order, the artificial routines” (252). Habermann explains how the image of the country became tied to that of the past, with

the city affiliated with the future (103). Referencing writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Williams describes what came to be called the regional novel and how much of the symbolism of regeneration was so exaggerated as to become an easy target for parody and satire; however, he asserts that this kind of targeting also hints at a “suburban uneasiness, a tension of attraction and repulsion, a brittle wit which is a kind of evasion by caricature” (253).

Like the mythologies of the hero attacked in Woolf’s *Orlando*, the connotations of the country and its perceived distinction from the city upholds cultural norms and constructions of ‘Englishness’ that, while easily mocked, are continuously appealed to by writers made uncomfortable by the rapid social changes that have inevitably broken down the separation between the two spaces. Literary depictions bestow a nostalgia for the simpler times of the past before the speed of technology, when nature reigned supreme, before modernization and the mechanization of culture. Regional fiction expresses this nostalgia for simpler times. As Williams concludes, novels such as *Cold Comfort Farm* address the “loss of a credible common world” and “the tension of an increasingly intricate and interlocking society: not only the changes of urbanism and industrialism, but the new social mobility and the ideas and education of an extending culture” (253). Yet, unlike Waugh, Gibbons refrains from falling into nostalgic feelings about the country as some Edenic paradise distinct from the modern corruption and moral failings of the city.

Wendy Parkins notes that while *Cold Comfort Farm* “relies for its humour on a sharp distinction between the rural and the urban,” it also relies on “the recognition of their mutual imbrication, not least through the mobility of its heroine, Flora Poste, who

moves effortlessly between these locations” (127). There is a constant to-ing and fro-ing as Bloomsbury intellectuals and Flora’s urban friends show up in Sussex, and Elfine leaves the farm for London to ready herself for the Hawk-monitor ball. As Parkins argues, the force of the novel’s parody “lies in its awareness that representations of the ‘unspoiled’ countryside found in regional novels were simply a deliberate exclusion of new social relations and practices that bound the country and the city; an exclusion, that is, of changes that were already historically entrenched by the 1930s” (127). The focus on modern technology and modes of transportation in *Cold Comfort Farm* further demythologizes this constructed creation between the two spaces. Gibbons strategically sets her novel in the “near future,” thereby allowing for certain exaggerations of how easy it is for characters to move quickly between the country and city, but the exaggerations are not far off. Matter of fact, they are close enough for the reader to completely forget that the setting is in the future. Unlike the depictions in regional novels, these modern technologies have made it so that the rural setting of the farm can no longer remain isolated, and Gibbons intends to deflate the nostalgic novels that construct and sensationalize the divide between the innocent rural past and dangerous urban present.

These spatial deconstructions of country and city coincide with Gibbons’s feminist project. It is through this movement between the two that change and progress are championed over out-dated, traditional, conservative expressions in literature that keep characters, especially women, in their place. Change, for women, is not something to mourn, and *Cold Comfort Farm* is no *Brideshead Revisited*. Flora, as the

representative of the new, modern woman of the 1930s, has agency in her urbanism and ability to move as she pleases. Jacqueline Ariail points out that it is most often the women characters who most feel the tension between country and city values; they “feel strongly the ‘ache of modernism’ as they seek fulfillment in the modern age” (64). As stated earlier, Aunt Ada Doom’s “dominant grandmother” role is only an act, one given to her by a tradition that supported this characterization. By maintaining the role, she allowed herself the only bit of agency offered women in her situation. It does not take long for Flora to offer Aunt Ada a new role: that of the modern aviatrix. Judith, trapped in her role as obsessive mother, finally leaves Cold Comfort with Dr. Müdel, a wry allusion to modernism’s preoccupation with psychoanalysis, but still she

looked illumined and transfigured and reft out of herself and all the rest of it, and even when allowances were made for her habit of multiplying every emotion she felt by twice its own weight, she probably *was* feeling fairly chirpy. (*Cold Comfort Farm* 203)

Melodrama and sensationalism are supplanted by Flora’s pragmatism, and the farm is ‘righted’ as most of the Starkadders leave to find their purpose in the modern world.

And yet much of the fun of reading *Cold Comfort Farm* is the reader’s recognition of the long-standing tradition of melodrama and sensationalism found in English literature, and, as I will explain, the city and its inhabitants are not held in high esteem, either. The irony imbedded in the novel’s direct parody of the regional and middlebrow style is that Gibbons’s imitation upholds the original to some degree as it also revises the expectations associated with it. Menippean satire and parody often work

through irony as an author says one thing but means another through the use of multiple voices, texts and meanings. Those new meanings created still refer back to the original source. In *Cold Comfort Farm*, that which is parodied is not always out-right mocked or ridiculed with the purpose of changing the tradition; ironically, it has the potential to be an ambiguous celebration of the parodied work. As Linda Hutcheon describes this complex dynamic of parody, it is “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (6). Much of the parody in Gibbons’s novel is meant to be a playful homage to English literary tradition, particularly a tradition that had historically embraced popular fiction, something Gibbons’s novel reminds her reader of as high literature and popular literature seem to blur together. Hutcheon’s points about twentieth century parody align with Bakhtin’s dialogism, particularly in relation to the intertextuality that happens with parody. She argues that twentieth century parody “trans-contextualizes” previous works as it revises them, creating a modern or postmodern dialogue with the past. This simultaneously reinforces and disrupts the literary norms it imitates, requiring the reader to question and mediate previous understandings and expectations of the genre or style being parodied.

When Flora’s friends visit from the city to help sneak Elfine from the farm so that she can go to the Hawk-monitor ball, Claud shows amusement at his decaying surroundings, not from shock or unfamiliarity but because the scene is all *too* familiar: “My dear, why all this Fall-of-the-House-of-Usher stuff?...I mean, this is too good to be true” (153). In this moment, the ironic layers can be peeled back like an onion. We have a parodic novel parodying the words of the city dweller encountering the parodied

representation of the dilapidated farm while alluding to the dreary literary style of one of Edgar Allan Poe's well-known short stories about a man who visits his friend at a crumbling, decaying, foreboding house. This reference to "The Fall of the House of Usher" is made more significant when considering that Poe anthropomorphizes the house, describing the windows as "eye-like." Flora also falls prey to this dreary imagery once Claud has spoken. She looks up at the farmhouse windows, and the narrator recounts her thoughts and feelings about the farmhouse in yet another overtly parodic passage of pathetic fallacy marked with three stars:

They were dead as the eyes of fishes, reflecting the dim, pallid blue of the fading west. The crenellated line of the roof thrust blind ledges against a sky into which the infusion of the darkness was already beginning to seep. The livid sliver tongues of the early stars leaped between the shapes of the chimney-pots, backwards and forwards, like idiot children dancing to a forgotten tune... The light was like the waxing and waning of the eye in the head of a dying beast.
(153)

Just as quickly as the reader encounters the melodramatic passage, the narrator slips into the informal, modern style generally associated with Flora: "The car moved forward, and Flora, for one, was immensely bucked to be off," and Claud says in his matter-of-fact way, "Well, Flora, you look extremely nice" (153). This unsentimental, unimpassioned dialogue juxtaposes sharply with the just described emotional response to the farm, and the parody of the two types of speech hold multiple meanings for a reader who senses this contrast. Without the didacticism of traditional satire, the reader is still able to see the playful silliness of Gibbons's parody. Even if the reader had never read "Fall of the House of Usher," she is able to add her own meanings and interpretations from whatever

other literary works she has read prior to *Cold Comfort Farm* because these conventions have been so repeatedly played out. All in fun and humor, Gibbons mocks the tendency to fall into these literary clichés, whether they be found in high or popular fiction, and Poe is an example of these nebulous literary markers since his fiction may be categorized as both popular and literary as well.

Gibbons pokes fun at middlebrow clichés, but she ironically uses her novel's own middlebrow approach to show most disdain for the actual highbrows that middlebrow literature often imitates. Irony again forms in layers as Gibbons imitates the genres that imitate other genres – most often the actual sources of “flapdoodle.” She uncovers that while the middlebrow rural writers of her time celebrate melodrama and sensationalism in their novels, these same moments of melodrama and sensationalism stem from highbrow literary conventions. The examples of D. H. Lawrence's style are not the only imitations of highbrow literature in the novel. Mixing Jane Austen's use of free indirect discourse and Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness style of writing, heavy use of ellipses, and more pathetic fallacy that would make Lawrence proud, the reader is allowed entry into Aunt Ada Doom's thoughts:

Make some excuse. Shut her out. She had been here a month and you had not seen her. She thought it strange, did she? She dropped hints that she would like to see you. You did not want to see her. You felt...you felt some strange emotion at the thought of her. You would not see her. Your thoughts wound slowly round the room like beasts rubbing against the drowsy walls. And outside the walls the winds rubbed like drowsy beasts. Half-way between the inside and the outside walls, winds and thoughts were both drowsy. How enervating was the warm wind of the coming spring.... (113)

Aunt Ada continues, jumping from present emotions to past memories, a stream of consciousness effect often employed by those producers of ‘sheer flapdoode,’ the experimental modernists. And yet again, Gibbons deflates this high literary style in her parody when she includes, “You had run away from the huge, terrifying world outside these four walls against which your thoughts rubbed themselves like drowsy yaks. Yes, that was what they were like. Yaks. Exactly like yaks” (114). Aunt Ada’s persistence in her own literary creation, her repetition, and the absurd simile comparing thoughts to drowsy yaks undercuts any seriousness in the art she has constructed, both highlighting the silliness of literature being taken so seriously as to become pretentious, as well as the fact that these moments intended to feel spontaneous are, indeed, highly constructed, manipulated pieces of text. In mocking these modernist styles, Gibbons demonstrates what Humble argues about middlebrow fiction as a whole: that it “laid claim to the highbrow by assuming an easy familiarity with its key texts and attitudes while simultaneously caricaturing intellectuals as self-indulgent and naïve” (Humble 29), with this self-indulgence being more clearly displayed in the caricatures of urban intellectuals. With Gibbons’s ability to so accurately parody those pieces of texts, by manipulating that which is already manipulated in its construction, the wall built between the so-called ‘authentic’ highbrows and those other ‘middling’ writers continues to crumble.

Gibbons saves her most comic vitriol for the urban intellectuals and the ridiculous avant garde artists who, more so than the middlebrow, pretentiously co-opt classic literature to bolster their own work. Mr Mybug, painted as the most pathetic of characters in the novel, is an obvious devotee of Lawrence and his school of defensive

masculinity. While highbrow writers and critics enamored of highbrow culture scorn the use of high art in middlebrow culture, the irony that Gibbons uncovers is that they, too, borrow from the works of others and sensationalist theories. To illustrate, during Flora's first encounter with Mybug she learns that he is writing about the life of Branwell Brontë, the alcoholic writer better known as the brother of the famous Brontë sisters. By the turn of the century, there were theories tossed about as to whether or not Branwell Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights* and not his sister, Emily. When Flora hears of Mr Mybug's plans, she thinks to herself:

Ha! A life of Branwell Brontë...I might have known it. There has been increasing discontent among the male intellectuals for some time at the thought that a woman wrote 'Wuthering Heights'. I thought one of them would produce something of this kind, sooner or later. (77)

Here we are reminded of the hilarious irony that Waugh was thought to be the true writer of *Cold Comfort Farm* because a woman could not produce such a witty novel, but onward we move with our silly Mr Mybug.

Gibbons's shrewd observations of sexism within the fashionable literary scene are emphasized through the absurd characterization of Mr. Mybug, the wannabe writer and intellectual, whom we can safely assume is a representative of Bloomsbury culture and a direct remark concerning the philosophies of male modernist writers such as D. H. Lawrence. Once the reader is introduced to Mr. Mybug and his misogynistic intellectualism, it becomes apparent that Flora's assumptions are all proven correct. He obsesses with "indelicate" topics, hoping to shock Flora and prove her to be a prude like

every other woman, in Mybug's opinion. But having lived in the city, Flora knows this type all too well. As Flora recaps:

The trouble with Mr. Mybug was that ordinary objects, which are not usually associated with sex...did suggest sex to Mr. Mybug, and he pointed them out and made comparisons and asked Flora what she thought about it all...[and] mistook her lack of enthusiasm and thought it was due to inhibitions. (120-1)

Furthermore, he epitomizes the pompous affect and posturing of the elitist intellectual, and all the while Gibbons mocks the type through Flora's thoughts.

Knowing his type, Flora asks Mybug what he plans to name his book because "she knew that intellectuals always made a great fuss about the titles of their books" (104). In a humorous tangent, she thinks of the misunderstandings incurred by various titles, with many of the most humdrum titles ("Victorian Vista") being about shocking events and scandals, and histories such as "Odour of Sanctity" sell "like hot cakes because everybody thought it was an attack on Victorian morality" when it was actually "a rather dull history of Drainage Reform..." (104). Once she learns that Mybug aims to use a quotation from Shelley's "Adonais" for his title, Flora opines that "one of the disadvantages of almost universal education was the fact that all kinds of persons acquired a familiarity with one's favourite writers. It gave one a curious feeling; it was like seeing a drunken stranger wrapped in one's dressing-gown" (104-5). The irony, of course, is that the 'intellectual' of the novel is the one who, in the eyes of the middlebrow Flora, bastardizes literature by pretentiously using it to further his status – the exact allegation critics in support of highbrow art hurl at the middlebrows. Gibbons shows the

hypocrisy in this elitist division, also demonstrating that, like the division between country and city, it does not really exist. For her, the only difference between the highbrows and middlebrows is the pretension and elitism found within highbrow culture. As Hammill insists, Stella Gibbons, along with other middlebrow writers, “mock those who seek distinction through deliberate eccentricity, intellectual posturing, bogus bohemianism, and social climbing” (18). And more often than not, these types may be found within the trendy setting of the city, regardless of whether they are writing *about* the city or the country.

Earlier, Flora had directly connected the city, specifically London, with these bohemian elitists, such as Mr. Mybug, who play at being unconventional. Although she wants to change Elfine into a fashionable, cosmopolitan lady, one cannot be too careful when placing such an impressionable person within the sphere of “those Bloomsbury-cum-Charlotte-Street lions” who “exchanged their husbands and wives every other weekend in the most broad-minded fashion” (112). Of course Gibbons, through Flora, hints at the conventionality of the unconventional, comparing the Bloomsbury bohemians to

the wild boars painted on the vases in Dickens’s story – ‘each wild boar having his leg elevated in the air at a painful angle to show his perfect freedom and gaiety’ ...each new love exactly resembling the old on: just like trying balloon after balloon at a bad party and finding they all had holes in and would not blow up properly. (112)

Humble observes that Flora’s response is representative of her moderate middlebrow pragmatism: “As the epitome of middlebrow sensibilities, Flora’s disdain is carefully

balanced: she expresses no shock at the antics of the free-living highbrows, rather a weary contempt, produced partly by over-familiarity” (31). She continues: “...this is a world that holds no mysteries or glamour for her – she moves in social circles in which these ‘types’ are encountered all too frequently” (31). And it is not only modernist literature that is mocked for its pretentiousness and absurdity; Gibbons saves a good dose of playful ridicule for avant garde films and theater productions as well.

In another moment that dissolves the separation between the country and city, Flora notices a connection between Amos’s religious performance and the rapture expressed in the faces of his congregation: “As an audience, it compared most favourably with audiences she had studied in London,” particularly during a meeting of the Cinema Society, whose members wore their own costumes of “bears and magenta shirts and original ways of arranging its neckwear” (93). They met for a viewing of a Norwegian film entitled “Yës,” a “film of Japanese life...with Japanese actors, which lasted an hour and three-quarters and contained twelve close-ups of water-lilies lying perfectly still on a scummy pond and four suicides, all done extremely slowly” (93). Flora recalls the avant garde worship of the audience who “mutter[ed] how lovely were its rhythmic patterns and what an exciting quality it had and how abstract was its formal decorative shape” (93). The reader understands through Flora’s own disdain for the film, as well as the senselessness of it as rendered through her matter-of-fact account, that these artsy films lack substance and actual entertainment value. Like Amos’s zealot congregants, the viewers who enjoy films like “Yës” come off as sheep, destined to think they like that which they are told is important, or that which they believe will give them cultural value.

In these comparisons between high art and popular culture, Gibbons removes all markers of importance and any claims of novelty or authenticity from this highbrow culture, effectively lowering it to the equal status of other imagined cultural tiers. In doing so, Gibbons's parody and satire blur any boundaries between these categories.

In *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Postmodern*, Margaret A. Rose focuses on the comical incongruities found in parody, pointing out that parody is “the comic refunctioning of performed linguistic or artistic material” (52). The comedic aspect of parody is also what enhances its dialogic and collective nature: Gibbons's middlebrow novel creates a community of readers who share cultural codes and are able to laugh when those cultural codes are abused. As Hammill insists, *Cold Comfort Farm* is “a sophisticated parody, its meaning...partly produced through its relationship with the literary culture of its day, and also through intertextual connections with the work of a range of canonical and popular regional authors” (154). It is a group form of laughter celebrated in the novel, and that group is a diverse community of highbrow, middlebrow, and popular fiction readers.

Challenging those who see parody as the realm of the elite, Hutcheon acknowledges “the didactic value of parody in teaching or co-opting the art of the past by textual incorporation and ironic commentary” (27). With a novel like *Cold Comfort Farm*, I add that the value is found not only in the works of the past, which can oftentimes contain elitism as found in highbrow writers such as T.S. Eliot and their focus on an erudite readership, but in the contemporary popular works of the time as well. Parody and its intertextuality reinforces and exposes readers to past literary conventions,

but it also has the power to challenge what counts as high literature and how past and present literature is used. It challenges how literature supports certain value systems, toying and playing with them until those value systems are either revised or crumble, thereby leading the way for new ideas and new ways of understanding.

The ending of *Cold Comfort Farm* exemplifies how these conventions and readerly expectations shift when dealing with a comedic, satirical and parodic text. Critics have debated the ‘happily ever after’ ending that appears to reinforce the classic marriage plot, a plot device also used by Jane Austen. Jacqueline Ariail sees the end as “satire giv[ing] way...to nostalgia and romance” (69). Flora, having accepted Charles’s proposal of marriage, is whisked away from the farm in his plane, ending with a sentimental note and declarations of love and the beauty of the night sky. However, Gibbons is playing the same ironic card Jane Austen plays in *Mansfield Park*. As a work of comedic parody by a woman writer, the novel “allows for complexity and depth without the generally oppressive didacticism so often found in the social satire of writers from Swift to Amis,” and the ending does not “reproduce the expected hierarchies, or if [it does] it is...with a sense of dislocation even about the happiest ending” (Barreca “Introduction” 11-12). There is something superficial and trite in such an agreeable ending, and the reader cannot completely rid herself of the parodic tone that the rest of the novel supports. Because of this triteness, the clichéd happily ever after ending is undermined, and we are reminded that Flora has created this story; she is the master of the outcome. By desiring a neat and ‘tidy’ plot, she must wrap up her meddling in the

Austenian fashion; she remains in control of her story, and Gibbons draws attention to the convention and its normalcy as a metafictional move.

As Rebecca O'Rourke avouches, this contrived romantic ending is no cop-out, nor is it a fall into nostalgia and romanticism for "even Flora's own capitulation to the romance of marriage has an element of parody to it" (14). The quaintness of the ending is undercut when Flora tells Charles that she loves him, but "he could not hear her very well" and "turned for a second, and, comforted, smiled into her eyes" (*Cold Comfort Farm* 233). This is not the melodramatic language typical at *Cold Comfort*; it is the appropriate, level-headed response between two equals. The only serious or elegiac quality found in Flora's leaving the farm is not due to nostalgia for the past or the simple life of the rural community but a finality to the end of Flora's narrative. The language play and 'tidying' of the Starkadders is now over, so the journey comes to an end, but there is a feeling of new beginnings as the reader can only assume that the meddling Flora will continue to meddle somewhere else. It might not be the outright ambiguous ending of a Virginia Woolf novel, but because of the satiric and parodic nature of Gibbons's novel, we are left with a feeling of incongruity – one of both unease and finality.

What may be inferred in such an ending is the sense that all matters of taste are included and are of equal importance. *Cold Comfort Farm* demonstrates how middlebrow literature may be viewed as what Macdonald and Singer refer to as "an alternative cultural formation" (6). Moving away from the "policing and exclusion" of highbrow literature, middlebrow culture allows for "an alternative formation for the

understanding and appreciation of literature, art and music, without didacticism, and with confidence in its appeal to consumers” (6). Middlebrow readers get a nice, typical, tidy ending where no loose ends are left to frustrate or leave the reader unsatisfied, and those savoring in the parody of convention are able to further read into such a conventional conclusion. As a whole, the intermingling of genres, various conventions, and the voices of opposing cultures lead to an egalitarianism not found in much of the literature regarded as important for scholarly interest, and this is what makes *Cold Comfort Farm*, a work of middlebrow satire, such a subversive text. By parodying highbrow and middlebrow literature, the dichotomy between the two disintegrates, leaving the reader with the understanding that they were never mutually exclusive opposites in the first place.

In the following chapter, I will examine the parody and revisioning found in two other popular fiction genres: dystopian fiction and the fairy tale. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a critically acclaimed dystopian novel focused on concrete issues pertaining to feminist politics, but as I will explain, it may also be viewed as a revision of dystopian novels written by men, particularly George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Angela Carter’s short stories found in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* are revisions of the fairy tales written by men as well. Unlike their male predecessors, these women writers shift from objective narratives from the male point of view in favor of exploring feminine subjectivity, and they use genre conventions in order to challenge how these conventions continue to marginalize women subjects.

CHAPTER VI

'NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES': FEMINIST (RE)VISIONS AND THE FIGHT FOR FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER* AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode.

- Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line"

As I have shown in the previous chapters, the assumption that satiric writing had all but disappeared during the first half of the twentieth century is not only erroneous¹ but misleading in that so few critics and scholars bothered to observe the satiric leanings in women's writing that often hinged upon the parodying of the established order. Perhaps these assumptions were due to the unconventionality and ambiguity of the much-favored genre of Menippean satire which gave the impression that satire, at least in its classical, monological form, was dead. But what most scholars of postmodern literature acknowledge is that the satiric spirit thrived during the second half of the twentieth century, and many of those writers were, in fact, women. What Luis Lafuente said in 2001 about contemporary literature stems from what was already in progress during the later part of the twentieth century: "we are witnessing a new and powerful revival of the satiric spirit in contemporary British fiction, a revival which is accompanied by a

¹ Yet no one can deny the significance and impact of satirical works by writers such as Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh, despite studies of women satirists being few and far between.

growing recognition from the critics and academics” (83). One reason for this surge in satiric writing is the postmodern use of popular fiction and the blending of genre forms. We have seen how women writers such as Woolf and Gibbons used these same techniques during the first half of the century, but they became a central focus in discussions about postmodern experimental literature. Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood are two prominent women writers who are not only often referenced as examples of this postmodern resurgence in satire but who have also crossed that boundary between popular and high fiction, writing fantastical works of fiction that are judged as literary enough to warrant critical attention.

While all historical breaks and movements are not as neatly situated as some literary scholars and historians would have us believe, it is widely accepted that with the end of the second World War, postmodernism took hold of the literary landscape as the movement *du jour* for literary scholarship.² Moreover, with postmodernism and its focus on self-consciousness, parody, pastiche and play came a revival in the satiric revisions of classic literature that go beyond that of the modernists: explicit questionings of social and political issues faced by marginalized groups of people and the material situation of the human subject came to the forefront, coexisting with issues of form and experimentalism. Experimental forms, particularly those associated with metafiction such as parody and self-reflexivity, take center stage in these postmodern works in order to further blur the

² While Brian McHale uses the postmodern deconstruction of the stability of a term such as *postmodernism* to argue that it is a contrived notion and, therefore, indefinable, he gives some characteristics of postmodernism as a continuation and exaggeration of the narrative experimentation found in modernism including the use of unreliable narrators, intertextuality, the blurring of identities, language play, and less of a focus on the plot with more focus placed on how the events are told.

boundaries between popular works of fiction and high literature. Furthermore, postmodern writers reference popular culture so as to place emphasis on the historical, political, and social concerns of their time. For women writers, particularly those with direct feminist intent like Carter and Atwood, metafiction may have “more radical implications than male postmodernist texts, in having more urgency and edge, more relevance to lived experience: for when women write of being trapped in an alien tradition, they write from a sense of living in a culture not their own” (Greene 19). It is this fragmented, constructed experience that women writers tend to draw from when constructing their metafictional narratives.

In a more exaggerated and out-right feminist manner than that of their modernist predecessors, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood present satiric parodies of fairy tales and dystopian fiction that confront not only masculine literary conventions in these popular fiction genres but the social absurdities and oppressive power systems still prevalent in contemporary society that threaten women’s subjectivity and autonomy. Just as Woolf and Gibbons share a precarious relationship with the genres they imitate, Carter’s and Atwood’s parodies complicate any easy allegiance with the genres they revise. Using the fairy tale conventions as revised in Angela Carter’s most popular collection of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, specifically the two re-imagined stories told by a first person narrator, the title story “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” and Margaret Atwood’s popular feminist dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I will examine how these two writers use the very generic conventions they supplant – the fairy tale and dystopia – in order to challenge the oppositions between reality and fantasy,

self and other, and the supposedly objective stance often taken by the typical narrator of both genres.

Before going into an in depth analysis of Carter and Atwood, it is necessary to establish connections between postmodernism and genres associated with fantasy and how these concepts relate to issues of subjectivity. Postmodern fantastical fiction, which covers various genres such as fairy tale, science fiction and dystopian literature, has become synonymous with new imaginings of everyday concerns, reflecting the material concerns of society just as much as social realism and often satirizing the same kinds of social injustices. However, unlike that of traditional social realism, many of the postmodern features of these newer works of fantasy rely on the metafictional methods defined by Patricia Waugh as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (*Metafiction* 2). Instead of implying that the narrative is an objective, factual account of reality, metafiction demystifies the creative act of writing and telling, making obvious the compositional process of the story. As Kevin Smith explains, metafictional texts “self-consciously draw attention to the artifice that is required in writing and reading any literary text. The storyteller is a metafictional trope, it draws attention to and highlights the process of narration and the complexity of the boundaries between speech and writing” (96-7).

Connecting this idea of metafictional technique to its social significance, Waugh asserts that, “[i]n providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the

possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2). That is to say, there is a direct connection between the experimentation and deconstruction of the seemingly stable reality in literature to one’s ability to see the constructedness of so-called ‘reality’ outside of the text – a ‘reality’ that generally upholds certain typologies and characterizations as fixed and stable as well. Because language is used to construct a “fictional illusion” in literary realism, and metafiction confronts this illusion, it becomes clear that “[t]he simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and ‘objective’ world is no longer tenable” (Waugh 3). With metafiction, the literary conventions set up for this kind of demystification become the object of parody (Waugh 66). Therefore, women satirists who use metafictional techniques deconstruct the binary of realism versus fantasy and the conventions associated with the two by revising genres that fit underneath the umbrella of ‘fantasy,’ such as the fairy tale and dystopia, to explore and satirize the harsh realities and actual social constructions embedded in the two fantastical genres.

Bakhtin has broached the topic of fantasy as dissolving the boundaries between it and realism through his discussion of the folkloric tradition, insisting that

the fantastic in folklore is *realistic* fantastic.... Such a fantastic relies on the real-life possibilities of human development.... Thus folkloric realism proves to be an inexhaustible source of realism for all written literature, including the novel.
(*Dialogic Imagination* 150-1)

Traditionally, what is ‘real,’ ‘fact’ or ‘truth’ has been placed in opposition to that which is considered ‘fiction’ or ‘art.’ As Magalia Cornier Michael explains, “The basis of these

oppositions lies in the notion that a stable objective reality exists outside of representation” (37). She delineates the ways in which the two most significant literary movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have constructed notions of reality: “Realist aesthetics assumes that this objective reality can be represented directly, while high modernist aesthetics insists that reality is always skewed by perspective or point of view so that every individual perceives her or his own version of reality” (37). Postmodernism, on the other hand, goes beyond both modernism and realism by contending that reality exists but is “*always* mediated by culturally constructed representation” (37). In other words, any attempt at representing reality, whether in an objective-realist or subjective-fictional framework, is a construction of ‘reality,’ thereby making ‘reality’ always instable, malleable, and open for change. If this sounds like something we have heard before, it is no coincidence: these same postmodern methods have been displayed in women’s modernist-experimental novels, especially those by Virginia Woolf. Just as she uncovered the gender constructions in *Orlando* and the nationalistic and historical constructions in *Between the Acts*, postmodern writers depict ‘truths’ as constantly revised, language as malleable and constantly changing, and, therefore, meaning as plural, shifting, and context-specific.

As Micheal states, “Interpretation becomes a continuous process: with each fluctuation in meaning, interpretations are subverted and must be reworked” (39). Such is the case for Carter’s stories in *The Bloody Chamber* and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Each author attempts a new meaning from the old and re-interprets previous interpretations through parodic intertextuality, thereby subverting established

understandings, which, in turn, leads to the continual reworking of the narrative. The consequence is that these different ways of narrating challenge the traditional forms as stable and sole representatives of their genres. For Carter, the fact that most readers will be familiar with the classic fairy tales in which she parodies only adds more layers to the meanings that had already been established while emphasizing the major differences in the revisions. For example, although the title of “The Bloody Chamber” does not explicitly reference Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” it becomes apparent once the Marquis forbids his new bride to enter the chamber. At this point in the narrative, the reader should be able to guess what will inevitably happen because of his or her memory of the original tale. The reader must then think back to the beginning of Carter’s version and investigate why Carter changes the voice, perspective, and temporal moment, as well as reversing the gender roles at the end of the story when the narrator’s mother saves her life instead of the brothers in Perrault’s story.

For Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers different, opposing narratives within the main narrative of the protagonist-narrator, Offred; the story is fragmented and loosely held together by pieces of conflicting memories and (re)interpretations, similar to that found in “The Bloody Chamber.” Offred’s self-conscious narrating style demystifies her composing process, further challenging the ‘realities’ constructed in other novels. She admits to embellishing her story here and there, tangentially mentioning about the narrative, “I’ve tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them” (Atwood 267). The reader has followed the clear symbolisms of flowers throughout the novel, whether making conventional

associations about white flowers representing purity or the common trope of flowers standing for rebirth and fertility. Offred adds another layer by making clear her own intentional inclusion of flowers, dialogically adding to the multiple meanings already inferred by the readers' cultural understandings and experiences.

Fantasy in all of its forms scrutinizes the 'real,' the objective. Rosemary Jackson disagrees with the popular notion that fantasy is mere escapism, maintaining that, at its core, fantasy is the "direct descendent" of the Menippean satiric tradition and, as such, highlights the material things in life that the speaker or writer wishes to change (2). Instead of offering an escape from reality, the fantastic always deals with a specific cultural context that takes into account the world outside of the literary imagination. Therefore, with its marriage of fiction and reality, the fantastic has the power to subvert cultural, social and political norms that marginalize and regulate people. This idea has already been established in Bakhtin's analysis of the folkloric tradition – an oral tradition that is often viewed as the precursor to the written fairy tale. Just as the satiric elements within carnival transgress boundaries, fantasy, as an offshoot of the carnivalesque, undermines social rules and norms that attempt to solidify government-sanctioned 'truths,' truths pushed on the community in order to maintain the status quo.

In contrast to traditional or classical literary forms that maintain these kinds of truths and orders and represent themselves as definitive and authoritative, "the fantastic serves...not in the positive *embodiment* of the truth but in the search after the truth, its provocation and most importantly, its testing" (*Dostoevsky* 94). Bakhtin's understanding of the fantastic and its relation to Menippean satire underscores its refusal of closure and

support of the limitless possibilities in testing old ‘truths,’ and when these ‘truths’ are repeatedly tested, they become multiplied, diversified, and further open to new interpretations. So while literary realism imitates reality in order to convey a sense of omniscience, permanence, and objectivity, fantasy imitates reality to create just enough familiarity to set the social and political scene while conjointly defamiliarizing that which we take as familiar and ‘real.’ Jackson adds that fantasy “confounds elements of both the marvelous and the mimetic” and that fantastical works of literature “assert that what they are telling is real – relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so – and they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what...is manifestly unreal (34). More importantly, these works “pull the reader from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and everyday world into something more strange, into a world whose improbabilities are closer to the realm normally associated with the marvelous,” thereby calling into question the reality of anything seen or recorded and destabilizing the narrative (34). It is this breaking down of the binary real/unreal, the destabilization of narrative, and the challenge to literary realism and the “rules of artistic representation” that make fantastical fiction such a useful, subversive tool for women satirists.

As I have explained, realism attempts to reflect reality in an objective, unified manner, while women’s comedy and satire, on the other hand, replaces unity with multiplicity, demonstrating that multiplicity and diversity through experimental styles and forms. What this accomplishes in revised narratives written from a subjective point of view is a demystification of the narrative process as the constructedness behind seemingly impersonal and objective narratives is made obvious through subjective

narration and experimental styling. Regina Barreca proclaims the importance in such multiplicity, voice and experimentation in women's texts: "The realization that rules can be suspended, that absolutes are only powerful when allotted power, when a unified, linear progression is given over to the recognition of multiplicity and diversion, all else becomes possible" (17-8). Women's writing, in its deconstructive (and reconstructive) wordplay and resistance to reductive resolution, challenges the separation between realism and experimentalism. Referencing Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Barreca declares:

[T]he presentation of 'realism' is less meaningful if the concept of the real is open to question. Once 'objectivity' is seen as simply the 'non-controversial aspect of things, their unquestioned impression, the façade made up of classified data,' as Adorno argues, then the concept of realism loses its own authority and subjectivity – play – is given new significance. (18)

One of the most significant breaks with the fairy tale tradition in Angela Carter's fairy tales and Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia is this refusal to maintain the hierarchy of objectivity over subjectivity. Both writers show a preference for focusing on female subjectivity, especially considering the first person narration in Carter's tales such as in "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Tiger's Bride," as well as in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Traditionally, both the written fairy tale and dystopian literature have used an omniscient third person narrator to give a sense of objectivity to reinforce the universality of the moral and lend credibility to the story and its teller. The impersonality and universality of the typical fairy tale begins with the expected opening of "There once was" or "Once upon a time," giving the narrative an air of veracity and wisdom in its

objective, third person telling. Typically, the exact region and time period in which the tale takes place is unknown and accepted as the classical reference to a distant time and place, left ambiguous, but, ironically, making the text more constrictive because of the assumption of universal truth of moral and meaning regardless of situation or context.

Similar to the fairy tale, this third person objectivity in dystopian fiction, even in the case of a limited third person narrator, produces the effect that the protagonist could be an everyman, or a character to which the reader can relate. An example of this effect can be seen in the construction of Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984*. Through the narrator's focalization on the actions and thoughts of Winston, the reader feels he or she understands the universal mechanisms of living under authoritarian rule. Although Winston's personal experiences are the subject of the narrative, the reader feels that these experiences, told linearly and somewhat matter-of-fact, could represent those of most middle-class people living under the rule of Big Brother. Ironically, there seems to be something quite authoritarian in these anti-authoritarian texts, as though it is safe to assume that the protagonist, his mission, and the argument within the novel could stand in as the universal for anyone else's experience. This is where postmodern women writers come in to satirize and refute this universalization of the human condition, drawing attention to subjectivity, difference, and flexibility inherent in the act and process of telling a story. As Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan attest, it is this new form of "critical dystopia" that "resist[s] genre purity in favor of an impure or hybrid text that renovates dystopian sf by making it formally and politically oppositional" (7). Much of

this renovation lies in how the narrative is constructed as a subjective, self-reflexive reconstruction of the traditional form.

Angela Carter's revised fairy tales play off of this postmodern tendency toward hybridity, intertextuality, subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and a general preoccupation with role reversals and the manipulation of gender norms. Fairy tales are a powerful genre for the use of destabilizing normative binaries because of the unlimited possibilities offered through the fantastic, making the genre ripe for exploration and reinvention. However, despite stemming from the freedoms found in the oral tradition of folklore, fairy tales as part of their own written literary canon have been complicit in maintaining gender norms and stereotypes such as the passive heroine, the heteronormative 'happy ending,' and simplistic oppositions such as good/evil, monster/angel, and virgin/whore – all characteristics meant to acculturate young girls and women into the patriarchal system where women are the 'other' of man in his dominant, assertive, and heroic position. Instead of the dialogic carnivalesque oral tradition championed by Bakhtin where role reversals, lack of closure, and anti-establishment symbols proliferated amongst the lower classes, the fairy tale became absorbed (and reabsorbed) into official culture, manipulated by eighteenth and nineteenth century writers, editors, anthologists, and publishers and used as a moralizing tool for the upper class and bourgeoisie.

Folktales, in their original oral form, did not show the disparity of power as is demonstrated in those that became part of the written tradition. Alison Lurie argues against feminist critics who have denounced fairy tales as a male chauvinist form. She asserts that this belief originates from the inclusion of particular stories that are not

considered representative of the folktale canon and stresses that these stories were chosen and edited by men who often present the female characters as passive. Lurie reminds us of the subversive potential in these tales:

Fairy tales...portrayed a society in which women were as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class.... [A]nd for every clever youngest son there was a youngest daughter equally resourceful. The contrast continued in maturity, when women were often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine came most often from a fairy godmother or wise woman, and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother. (18)

In *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*, Catherine Orenstein challenges this understanding of fairy tales, arguing that “[c]omplete submission to these trials is the heroine’s ticket to happily-ever-after – for if the heroine is loved for her beauty, she is *rewarded* for her passivity” (142). But, as even Orenstein acknowledges, these published tales bear little resemblance to the oral tales from which they came (84). As Amie Doughty states, the editors and anthologists purposefully left out tales with strong female characters and “presented tales with female characters who had qualities that fit the ideal of womanhood of the time. As they were published and republished, they presented more and more passive heroines until they became the tales that are familiar today” (66). Roemer and Bacchilega concur, making an even clearer connection between the construction of literary fairy tales and their historical moment, adding that “fairy tales that have been altered from their oral versions come to reflect, to whatever degree, the ideological perspectives of their editors and reframers” (16).

Jack Zipes explains that fairy tales, in their original folkloric form, were once dialogic in their telling, depending on the audience or an assumed “You” during the narrative process. Furthermore, “the audience was to be spontaneous in its reception of stories and exchange of remarks. The more folktales could be subjected to the rules of conversation, the more they were ornamented and accepted within the dominant discourse” and “in each new stage of civilization in each new historical epoch, the symbols and configurations of the tales were endowed with new meaning, transformed, or eliminated in relation to the needs and conflicts of the people within the social order” (3, 6). What was once an oral tradition reflecting the day-to-day work and experiences of the peasant women who imagined these tall-tales and told them to their children and the children whom they watched over, these tales were appropriated and revised to communicate other social and cultural values specific to the time and place of the reviser. With the rise of print culture, tales were gathered and recorded for those who could afford to purchase the collections and, having then “embodied an aristocratic ideology of appropriate behavior for children in France during the eighteenth century,” they again “shifted to conveying a bourgeois view during the industrialized nineteenth century in Germany and England” (Makinen 17).

Merja Makinen’s study of the fairy tale in *Feminist Popular Fiction* targets the ways in which the fairy tale became an oppressive form, exploring how fairy tales indoctrinate children “so that they will conform to dominant social standards which are not necessarily established in their behalf” (34). Charles Perrault is the key figure for how we understand the classical fairy tales as transmitters of moral codes, even now three

hundred years later, and it is Perrault's "Bluebeard" that serves as the original model for Carter's "The Bloody Chamber." Perrault's version first appeared in his 1697 collection *Contes du temps passé, or Stories to Pass the Time*. As Makinen explains, "Perrault introduces the form of the fairy tale as we have come to recognize it, by taking oral tales from the French peasantry, and adding a rhymed moralistic (and hence overtly ideological) 'explanation' to each tale" (59). Perrault's tales established and made standard the fairy tale formula of the passive, silent, obedient and beautiful woman rescued by the brave hero. In addition, as described in Marina Warner's extensive historical overview and analysis found in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, these tales often included 'bad' or absent mothers as a common archetype, while evil step-mothers or 'good' god mothers become surrogates, replacing the absent biological mother. The characters are rarely presented as complex, and there is little room for ambiguity (xxii).

Yet Warner resists denouncing the fairy tale as a repressive genre, acknowledging that fairy tales arise out of the material circumstances of the time. She writes:

The matter of fairy tale reflects...lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age; the telling of the stories...gains credibility as a witness record of lives lived, of characters known, and shapes expectations in a certain direction. (xxiii)

While this may be the case in some ways, it is hard to completely support the idea that the stories as recorded by Charles Perrault give room for women's perspectives or that they support women's causes. Although the wife lives at the end of "Bluebeard," her good fortune relies on her brothers coming to her rescue, reinforcing the cliché of the

passive heroine saved by the active man. And regardless of Warner's reading that Perrault depicted his disapproval of the arranged marriages of his time that placed women in these submissive roles (265), the reader gets nothing of the wife's voice and is informed of the moral at the end that warns of women's disobedience and curiosity. Perrault attaches this pithy moral: "Ladies, you should never pry,/ You'll repent it by and by!/ 'Tis the silliest of sins;/ Trouble in a trice begins./ There are, surely – more's the woe – / Lots of things you need not know..." (Perrault 43). Ultimately, like Eve's disobedience in her desire for knowledge in the Garden of Eden, it is the woman whose guilt is the primary focus of the story if the reader accepts the singular meaning of the concluding moral.

This ambiguity and disagreement between scholars who either support the written fairy tale as liberatory and encompassing feminist possibilities or view the fairy tale as a genre that reinforces restrictive morality and negative stereotypes of women is what makes the fairy tale such a fascinating genre for feminist postmodern appropriation. Feminist writers such as Angela Carter have confronted the issue of sexism in fairy tales by parodying and revising certain stories that have, through the literary tradition and print culture, reinforced stereotypes of the weak and passive female protagonist. Much of this passivity has come from her lack of voice and subjectivity because, traditionally, a perceived omniscient narrator tells her story. In the stories "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Tiger's Bride," Angela Carter subverts this traditional way of telling folk tales by putting the heroine's story in her own voice as a first person narrator, allowing her to

speak and reflect back on the moment that led to her maturation as she moves away from fairy tale stereotype to experienced female subject.

In Perrault's original tale on which "The Bloody Chamber is based," Bluebeard is presented as a mysterious figure who, from unknown origin, has amassed a great deal of wealth – enough wealth that a young girl, blinded by his gentlemanly airs, is able to overlook the blue beard that has frightened away other potential brides and marries him without much of an understanding of his 'true' character. As the narrative (quickly and succinctly) progresses, skipping a month of apparently unimportant activity, Bluebeard informs his bride that he must leave her alone in the castle to address a few business affairs. He gives her a set of keys and tells her she has access to everything in the castle except for one closet for which he forbids her entry. Considering the plethora of warning narratives within the fairy tale tradition, the reader immediately suspects the outcome of the story: wife disobeys husband, enters forbidden room, and is found out by husband upon his return. The evidence of her crime permanently stains the key when she discovers the bodies of his past dead wives and drops the key in a pool of blood. Climactically, Bluebeard finds the bloodstain, vows to kill his wife, but is killed when his wife's brothers come to her rescue. The narrative is short and to-the-point, linearly and objectively told by an omniscient narrator who is more concerned with getting the facts of the story to the reader than offering an in depth exploration of the characters. Each remains an empty shell, a fairy tale type that is only meant to lead toward the final moral: "Curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to deep regret. To the displeasure of many a

maiden, its enjoyment is short lived. Once satisfied, it ceases to exist, and always costs dearly.”

In his seminal work on the psychoanalytic underpinnings of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim interprets the tale and its moral as a lesson of female obedience and faithfulness, and “as a test of trustworthiness, the female must not inquire into the secrets of the male” because to be unfaithful to her husband’s orders is to be unfaithful to him as a man (300). Within Bettelheim’s reading are psychoanalytic interpretations of woman’s sexual maturation with the key associated with the phallus and the blood on the key her loss of virginity, leading Bettelheim to the conclusion that “it makes sense that the blood cannot be washed away: defloration is an irreversible event,” with the primary lesson learned being “women, don’t give in to your sexual curiosity” (301).

Despite this defloration and the “earth-shaking events” that have occurred, the main characters, Bluebeard and his unnamed wife, remain the same people they were before the climactic events in the story (Bettelheim 303). They are static and flat, and the reader gains very little from the story except for the requisite lessons gleaned from the plot and attached morals. In “The Bloody Chamber,” Angela Carter will take this basic plot and moral structure and make it her own, keeping only the bare bones so as to make it recognizable to her reader while exaggerating what Bettelheim perceives as the theme of sexual maturation in the story. Carter turns what Bettelheim sees as the primary lesson of the story on its head to show the importance of sexual curiosity as a means toward self-enlightenment and agency.

Unlike its predecessor, the reader is made aware from the very beginning of “The Bloody Chamber” that the story is a memory-narrative told by the main character as we travel back in time to when our heroine leaves her childhood home to live with her new husband. Instead of the vague introduction and focus on Bluebeard as the main character in Perrault’s “Bluebeard” with “There was once a man who,” or the typical fairy tale trope “once upon a time,” the narrator starts with a declaration of her ownership of the tale, and, in a more realist tradition than the original “Bluebeard,” we learn her exact circumstances and location in vivid, emotional detail:

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon – lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother’s apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage. (7)

The reader has gotten her first glimpse of an unexpected setting for the fairy tale, a modern setting of trains with the background of Paris from which the narrator leaves. This is also where she begins to construct her story as one of maturation, directing our attention to her moving away from “girlhood” and into the “unguessable country of marriage” that symbolizes her ascent into womanhood, all the while recounting her first moment of awakening as she thinks back to her youthfulness and naiveté, a narrative technique repeated throughout the story. As the narrator dives deeper and deeper into her past memories, she emphasizes her virginal innocence yet budding sexuality:

My satin nightdress had just been shaken from its wrappings; it had slipped over my young girl's pointed breasts and shoulders, supple as a garment of heavy water, and now teasingly caressed me, egregious, insinuating, nudging between my thighs as I shifted restlessly in my narrow berth. (8)

Clearly in control of how her narrative takes shape, she goes further back to remember the Marquis' courtship, how he liked to surprise her while she played the piano, always expecting her to act the part of the startled little bird, thus connecting these past actions to her repeated insistence of her youth and innocence.

Nevertheless, this insistence of her naiveté, her continual mentioning of how much older the Marquis was than she, and how she was "seventeen and knew nothing of the world" beckons the reader to question the narrator's real feelings about her own complicity in allowing a dangerous marriage. We have already read that her mother felt uncertain about the pairing and had twice asked if her daughter was sure she loved the man she was marrying; the narrator's reply, "I'm sure I want to marry him," suggests the beginnings of a confession of complicity. Looking back, she knows she did not love the Marquis but was enamored with the idea of becoming a woman, of experiencing the gaining of knowledge through a sexual awakening. The vivid imagery and references to marital beds, her acknowledgement that something about his expression and countenance seemed off, and the thrill she got at being objectified complicate any easy marker of virginal innocence.

In a parenthetical aside, the narrator swears that she "had never been vain until [she] met him," but the reader wonders whether she should be believed (12). She has already admitted to "mimic[ing] surprise, so that he would not be disappointed" each

time he sneaks up on her at the piano, and she recalls watching his gaze on her “with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab” (11). When she catches her reflection in a mirror, “for the first time in [her] innocent and confined life, [she] sensed in [herself] a potentiality for corruption that took [her] breath away” (11). Throughout the narrative, the memories pile on, and the reader continues to question the reliability of the protagonist’s story.

However, while navigating between contradictions of innocence and complicity, we must remember that the narrator is now more mature and experienced, looking back at the moment when she was forced into womanhood. Once she has disobeyed the Marquis and finds the bodies of his previous wives, she says that she “had sold [herself] to this fate” (29). The act of selling is left ambiguous: was it in her act of disobedience or in the act of marrying a man whom she hardly knew, despite the warning signs she insists were there as she looks back at their courtship?

The only moment of fairy tale magic occurs with the unwashable stain of blood, both on the key that gives her away and the permanent imprint on her forehead once the Marquis ‘anoints’ her for his next sacrifice. By the end, she recalls her rescue by her courageous mother, an important reversal of the typical fairy tale traits of the absent mother and male hero, cementing the bond between mother and daughter. She “can only bless the – what shall I call it? – the *maternal telepathy* that sent [her] mother running...” (40). And she has entered a new, more modest life by marrying the blind piano tuner. She ends her story: “No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that

red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it – not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but, because it spares my shame” (41). She understands that she is forever marked by her experience and feels shame in her complicity in the marriage market that almost cost her her life.

And yet, the reader is hesitant to mark her with blame as the Marquis has done. Kathleen Manley, in her study of the narrator as a “woman in process,” insists that, even at the end of her tale, she is “someone who is exploring her subject position and beginning to tell her own story” (83). The process of becoming a subject is a continual process that does not end simply because the narrative ends; this is not the closed ending of the traditional fairy tale but the start of a never-ending reflection on how she perceives each older self as it is replaced with each new experience in her life, events that are not created in isolation since the creation of a self must be a dialogic act involving self and other. Whether or not the narrator was truly innocent or complicit is beside the point when considering her continued growth into a subject in control of her own story – a story that reflects her current, malleable understanding of her self as she looks back to her earlier preconceptions.

In his study of postwar satire, Ian Gregson connects what he calls “faux naïveté” of the fairy tale form to a broader technique of caricature in postwar fiction. He argues that caricature has become the defining characteristic of twentieth century literature, particularly the postmodern tendency of deconstructing traditional western, masculine cultural values, replacing them with “a cultural polyphony in which self-consciously gendered and racial perspectives have claimed their right to assert themselves” (5). He

adds that, through satirically portraying humans as objects and animals, literary texts make the statement that certain cultural constructs do, in fact, dehumanize and objectify societal victims. We see this in how the Marquis attempts to compose the narrator as object instead of subject. Carter's fairy tale, as a work that is more magical realism than completely folkloric, "sardonically deploys childish crude images...repeatedly satirize[ing] the oppression of innocent victims by tyrannical figures who are meretricious and cynical" (Gregson 6). This caricature of her innocence implies the actual innocence of women who, despite being complicit in their situation, are placed in very real material social circumstances that offer girls such as the narrator of "The Bloody Chamber" very little choice – an issue that will again show itself in Carter's "The Tiger's Bride," a remake of the classic fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast" that accentuates the commoditization present in the original tale when "Beauty" reflects on her position as her father's bargaining chip during a game of cards.

In "The Bloody Chamber," when the narrator is first undressed by her new husband, she hints at her own objectification as a product of exchange: "And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain" (15). The complexity in the narrator's character, as she presents herself, supports her as a more dynamic, round character than the typical fairy tale heroine; while she is certainly a 'product' in two senses, as a product purchased by her husband and a product of her cultural environment, she has also been in control of her fate from the beginning. She willingly gave herself to the Marquis in marriage, and the outcome has been one of experience and growth in character versus the stasis found in the classical fairy tale. Despite her feelings of guilt, shame and complicity, the painful

experience she narrates is what, ultimately, allows her subjectivity and agency when considering the constraint of the typical fairy tale formula. As Bonnici argues in “Female Desire in Angela Carter’s Fairy Stories,” the focus Carter places on her heroines’ sexuality subverts patriarchal expectations of women because they learn from their sexual desires, creating a space for subversive writing “in which the silent protagonists are given a voice and the carnivalization of the original situation is engendered” (9). In “The Bloody Chamber,” the narrator’s painful story gives her the chance to narrate her self, giving voice to those who are generally (and generically) voiceless in the traditional fairy tale.

Part of the narrator’s fight for subjectivity and agency over her own narrative lies in her purposeful use of symbolic imagery throughout her story – a symbolization that continuously insists on her growth from object to subject position. The Marquis’s double aim for the protagonist is one of both objectification and initiation: while attempting to keep her as object, he sadistically takes pleasure in corrupting her sexual innocence. In his view of her, she is both corruptible ‘girl’ and collectible ‘woman,’ another trophy to add to his growing ‘art’ collection that includes pornographic images, both pictorial and corporeal in the brutalized bodies of his previous wives. One of the narrator’s wedding gifts is a painting of Saint Cecilia, and, not knowing the story of Saint Cecilia’s virginity and eventual martyrdom by beheading, the narrator remembers thinking that the celestial image and the “prim charm of this saint” was something to which to aspire (14). This is exactly the role the Marquis intends to reprise, joining his little saint with the other objects he has created in his bloody chamber of mutilated wives. When the narrator

enters the chamber to find these bodies, she refers to her situation as entering the “fated sisterhood,” thereby multiplying her selfhood in that moment in the various grotesque images of the tortured women.

The image of the narrator standing in the chamber, looking at her other selves in their various disfigured forms, parallels her earlier experience in the Marquis’s bedroom when she is first disrobed and views her reflection in multiple mirrors surrounding the marital bed. She sees herself not as various versions of a self, or multiple selves, but as the same stagnant image repeated: “[t]he young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades...” (14). It is not until she experiences the brutal realities in the bloody chamber and sees herself in the disparate women of differing origins and consequences that her self becomes multiple. Therefore, the violence of the chamber and her husband’s attempted murder of her are part of the painful process of becoming – an image reminiscent of La Trobe’s attempt at self-actualizing her audience in the fragmented mirrors in *Between the Acts*.

In “The Bloody Chamber,” these events that take place in the chamber and castle as a whole figure as a rite of passage, sexual initiation, and rebirth, the bloody chamber symbolizing the womb, and the Marquis’s castle, or what Mary Kaiser describes as a “phallic tower,” standing in as a symbol of masculine sexuality. But this image of the castle tower refers back to the womb imagery of the chamber as well when the narrator describes it as situated on the “amniotic salinity of the ocean” (Kaiser 32, Carter 12). She recounts her surroundings as one would an Impressionistic painting, “a landscape of misty pastels with a look about it of being continuously on the point of melting” (13). A

place of “faery solitude” and exile, the castle, “with turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day...” is a liminal space meant for self-actualization; it is “at home neither on land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves” (13). This hazy space of in-betweenness is where the narrator moves from object to subject of her own story.

Cristina Bacchilega discusses the necessity of the liminal space and violent rebirth of the protagonist. She offers the concept of “double subjectivity” in relation to the multiple meanings imbedded in the ways of reading the narrator’s subjectivity, especially when considering the intertextual reference to Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” As Bacchilega explains, there are two central motifs in the Bluebeard tale: the ‘Forbidden Chamber’ and the ‘Bloody Key.’ Depending on which the reader favors as the central motif, the meaning fundamentally changes:

if the ‘Forbidden Chamber’ rather than the ‘Bloody Key’ is treated as the tale’s central motif, then ‘Bluebeard’ is no longer primarily about the consequences of failing a test – will the heroine be able to control her curiosity? – but about a process of initiation which *requires* entering the forbidden chamber. (Bacchilega 107)

Countering Bettelheim’s preoccupation with the bloody key as a marker of lost virginity and guilt, Carter’s move to entitle her revisionist tale “The Bloody Chamber” shifts the focus to that forbidden space of dangerous knowledge. Bacchilega also challenges the traditional reading of “Bluebeard” as a story about the dangers of sexual curiosity and

betrayal, implying that Carter's alteration of the narrative deconstructs such a reading. She claims instead that "[t]he heroine's knowledge of her husband, of herself, and of *sexual politics*" is at the heart of the story, and that "[t]he test is whether she can acquire this knowledge and then use it cleverly enough to triumph over death" (107).

Similarly, Cheryl Renfroe adds to this discussion of initiation and survival, asserting:

since the heroine's exploration of the chamber is overtly desired by both the husband and the girl for *different* reasons and with the hope of *different* outcomes, the tale becomes at once a depiction of the oppressive sexual initiation of a young girl at the hands of a powerful older man as well as a tale of self-initiation and survival undertaken willingly by a member of a community of women. (90)

The community of women in the story revolves around the close relationship between mother and daughter. The mother's own personal stories, as remembered by the narrator now in the present, show the mother to be a social transgressor who "outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I" (Carter 7). A strong, self-determined woman, she also married for love and not wealth and raised her daughter on her own after her husband died. Although the narrator chooses a different path from her mother, her mother's stories are remembered as an example of the inner strength she inherited. She must make her own choices and experience the dangers in life in order to self-actualize.

Manley justifies the narrator's lack of learning from her mother's stories of female strength and independence, insisting that, while the narrator has material from

which to draw, “[b]efore she can make use of this material, she must start a journey toward establishing herself as a subject; this journey involves consciously seeing herself as others (and particularly the Marquis) see her” (85). Regardless of her own mother’s intuition and hesitance in allowing her daughter to marry the Marquis, the narrator’s mother ultimately leaves the decision to the daughter because she understands that, in order to grow as a female subject, she must face those ‘others’ within masculine society. Renfroe is right to read this as the mother’s acknowledgment of her daughter’s need to “attain adult status through exposure to the adult knowledge the union will bring” (90). While both victimized and complicit in her situation, “the narrator’s attention to material conditions undeniably promotes an unflinching and self-implicating understanding of heterosexual sado-masochism within a socially exploitative society” (Bacchilega 123). Despite the reservations both mother and daughter have about the union, they understand women’s socio-economic motivations and need to maneuver and assert themselves within the system that objectifies and subjugates them.

In contrast to Bacchilega, Manley and Renfroe’s celebratory readings, Patricia Duncker criticizes Carter’s revised fairy tales for reestablishing the same problems ingrained in the traditional tales. She contends that “[t]he infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale, which fits the form to its purpose, to be the carrier of ideology, proves too complex and pervasive to avoid. Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait jacket of their original structures” (6). But Duncker is ignoring the satirical, parodic, and ironic structure of the tales, including their ideological value: they are far more ambiguous than Duncker gives them credit for because the narrator is unreliable and still in the process of

becoming. While there appears to be a sense of finality to some of the stories and a reinforcement of subject and other, as postmodern revisions of the fairy tale Carter's stories challenge the dualisms supported in the traditional fairy tale structure. They deconstruct easy readings of right versus wrong and the relationship between oppressor and victim, showing that the system is at fault for upholding these oppositional relationships. With their moral ambiguity and emphasis on the transformative powers of telling one's story, Carter's fairy tales resist closure, keeping the creation of subjectivity endless and infinitely changing.

Carter's parodic revision of the classic fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast" serves as another example of her preoccupation with reconstructing the traditional fairy tale's stories of sexual initiation, feminine self-sacrifice, and the rule of the father in patriarchal society, again shifting focus from the image of the passive heroine who surrenders herself to the Beast to that of mutuality and the material reality of the Beauty-character's cultural context. Published in 1756, the most popular version of the 'Beast' tale, "La Belle et La Bête," was written by Madame Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont and came from a long line of folklore about mysterious husbands and tests of woman's faithfulness such is found in Apuleius's "Cupid and Psyche," for example (Bacchilega 72). In the original 'Beast' tale told through the typical omniscient narration of the fairy tale tradition, the reader is first introduced to Beauty's father, a wealthy merchant who has several children. The youngest, deemed the most beautiful and giving, therefore, also the "better" of her older sisters, refuses many proposals in favor of staying with her father after he loses his fortune. After the father receives a notice that one of his ships containing goods has

safely arrived, he sets off on a journey to retrieve them, and Beauty requests he bring back only a simple rose. Once Beauty's father reaches his destination, he finds that he has lost his merchandise and is still poor, finds shelter at the Beast's palace, and takes a rose for his daughter upon leaving for home. The Beast, angry at this indiscretion, allows the father to trade his life for that of his daughter. Beauty, ever the stereotypically self-sacrificial 'good' daughter, leaves her father's home to stay with the Beast, only to find that she loves him despite his ugliness. She leaves the home only when she hears her father is sick with the promise that she will return to the Beast after one week. Her deceptive sisters plot to keep Beauty away from the Beast longer, hoping that he will devour her out of anger; however, enveloped by feelings of guilt for not having kept her promise, Beauty arrives to find the Beast dying. She begs him not to die, offers herself to him in marriage, and he is magically transformed from Beast to handsome prince because, as we all know, a fairy tale must end with the happy union between beautiful heroine and handsome hero.

Embedded in this traditional narrative of "Beauty and the Beast" is the socio-economic and gendered position of Beauty within the patriarchal system that situates her as the olive branch or bargaining chip between two men. Bacchilega makes the solid observation that this story mimics the expected roles and familial ties within a historical framework. Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach reads this story less as a marital transaction and more through the lens of transference: Beauty transfers her Oedipal attachment from her father to the Beast (Bettelheim 309). Bacchilega refutes Bettelheim's psychoanalytic reading, insisting that Beauty "is initiated into married life

within a patriarchal frame: whether she is a willing object, victim, heroine, or all three, both father and husband benefit from the exchange” (75). Her primary argument is that the story supports the patriarchal ideal of the humble and chaste woman who, while having enough agency to choose her own fate, ultimately chooses that which will uphold the system, maintaining a subjectivity that is “construed as absence and whose symbolic reward is in giving rebirth to another” (78). Bacchilega’s statement implies that this kind of subjectivity in the fairy tale heroine does not create an actual subject with actual agency: her so-called ‘choice’ seems programmed by systemic forces outside of herself and her experiences with others.

In “Re-Constructing Oedipus Through ‘Beauty and the Beast,’” Sylvia Bryant agrees with this interpretation, arguing that Beauty is “both object of barter and plot device,” which does not equate being the subject (443). Although none of these readings of “Beauty and the Beast” mention Eve Sedgwick’s theory of the “erotic triangle,” the stress that these critics place on the bartering process with ‘woman’ standing in as both bargaining chip and plot device play on the same idea that, within the male-centered literary tradition, male homosocial bonds rely on the presence of women as exchangeable property for the purpose of cementing those relationships. Sedgwick specifically refers to what she calls “male homosocial desire,” arguing that men compete with one another and “traffic” the shared female object of desire as a means for “maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (Sedgwick 25). While Beauty’s father and the Beast are not romantic rivals, in the literal sense, they secure their relationship as business partners through the exchange of Beauty’s body. In the original tale, the marital exchange,

despite Beauty's active participation and choice in the situation, is still less between man and woman and more accurately between the two men. Beauty's subservience and acquiescence within this patriarchal system of exchange makes Beauty the stereotypical virtuous, 'good' daughter.

Carter's remake, "The Tiger's Bride," satirically parodies the overall story of "Beauty and the Beast" and its reinforcement of women as bartering tools, instead granting 'Beauty' the agency to tell her own side of the story and, thereby, giving her the power to express her anger and defiance at being made an object of exchange. As is the case in the beginning of "The Bloody Chamber," the narrator demands the reader recognize the central part she plays in her story with the possessive "my": "My father lost me to the Beast at cards," telling us that she is not simply a plot device but the actual subject under discussion (51). Moreover, Beauty makes it clear that her father is to blame for any 'lack' his actions have caused, since he was the loser of the game and the loser of his 'property' as he laments, "I have lost my pearl, my pearl beyond price" (55). Full of ironic disdain and dark humor, she emphasizes her situation of being made a commodity, ironically begging the reader not to misread her story: "You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at *no more* than a king's ransom" (54). Not allowed personhood and agency, Beauty understands that she holds nothing more than monetary worth in the eyes of patriarchal society.

Like "The Bloody Chamber," the narrator of "The Tiger's Bride" offers her reader a vividly detailed, imagery-filled description of the story's setting – a far cry from the matter-of-fact presentation of the original tale. We are made to feel the cold of

Russia and the darkness of the city as the narrator experiences it, and we cannot help but become affected by the violence in her diction when she describes one's relationship with nature as "war" and the candles "dropp[ing] hot, acrid gout[s] of wax on [her] bare shoulders (Carter 51). She "watched with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly" as her father "rids himself of the last scraps of [her] inheritance" (52). While this focus on "the rottenness of a social order that trades (female) bodies to sustain some privileged souls" (Bacchilega 97) is implicit in fairy tales like the original version of "Beauty and the Beast," Carter makes sure to give emphasis to this issue in her revision. One could almost argue that it is an example of parodic exaggeration, except for the fact that very little if anything is being exaggerated: as is the case with "The Bloody Chamber," other than a few mystical happenings such as transformations from human to animal, "The Tiger's Bride" underlines the undercurrent of realism flowing throughout Carter's stories.

Notwithstanding the similarities between the two stories, and in contrast to the shallow depictions of women in classic fairy tales, Carter paints her heroines as individuals with unique stories and personalities. Unlike the narrator of "The Bloody Chamber," the narrator of "The Tiger's Bride" never constructs herself as the typical naïve child in her story of personal growth. Rather, this narrator displays a voice of experience, knowledge and cynicism that continues throughout her telling of her story. She denounces the Beast's gift as "damned white roses," resentful that he could think "a gift of flowers would reconcile a woman to any humiliation" (55). This is certainly not the impressionable young girl that the Marquis had seduced with flowers, jewelry, and

other various possessions. Beauty understands her market value and her one possession of worth, telling the reader that during her journey to her new captor's home, she thought, "For now my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment" (56). Likewise, the narrator never presents herself as the silenced, subservient woman. When told that the Beast's only request is to see her undressed, after which she would be returned to her father with money and presents, she "let out a raucous guffaw" and proudly declares to her reader, "no young lady laughs like that!" (58), reminding us of the power and subversiveness of woman's laughter in the face of her oppressor.

With a good dose of wit and social insight, the narrator makes obvious her role and place in society and takes advantage of her bodily asset, reversing the market dynamic established by the men by negotiating with the Beast herself. She moves from negotiated object to subject of negotiation, offering only the use of the lower half of her body in exchange for her freedom. But she allows this bargaining only if she is then "deposited in the public square, in front of the church" and given "only the same amount of money that you would give to any other woman in such circumstances," implying that the Beast intends to place her in the role of whore (59). Ironically, the narrator also implies that there is more power in this role than her previous role of sacrificial virgin because, like the two negotiating men, she would then be an active, rewarded member within the process of exchange.

Yet at this point in the narrative, our narrator has not actualized to become a full subject, regardless of her powerful wordplay and wit. Based on her previous experiences

at the hands of men, the narrator assumes that the Beast objectifies her as well. She will come to realize his role as 'Other,' thus shifting the artificial homosocial bond between her father and the Beast to a more mutual bond of shared otherness connecting the Beast to herself. In his attempt to be human and, therefore, subject, the Beast has hidden his tiger form underneath cloaks, masked his face in the image of man, and covered his animal scent with strong cologne. It is when he takes the narrator horseback riding that she begins to see her likeness in the Beast, thus identifying with the 'Other.' She recalls:

A profound sense of strangeness slowly began to possess me. I knew my two companions were not, in any way, as other men, the simian retainer and the master for whom he spoke, the one with clawed forepaws.... I knew they lived according to a different logic than I had done until my father abandoned me to the wild beasts by his human carelessness. This knowledge gave me a certain fearfulness still; but, I would say, not much...I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason.... I certainly meditated on the nature of my own state, how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand. (Carter 63)

At this point in the narrative, the narrator has come to the realization that the Beast is not like the other men in her life. Like herself, he has been forced to wear a social mask, maintaining the accepted role society has placed on him. She thinks about the clockwork doll given to her and how it stands as a symbol for her own imitative life of mindlessly performing exactly as society has programmed her. Once the Beast offers himself to her in his own nakedness, she gains control over her own subjectivity as she chooses to undress and expose herself to him, and subject and object meld into one through this mutual act. The narrator becomes "the subject of her own transformation, her own

rebirth” (Bacchilega 99). She has agency because she offers herself to the Beast only after he, too, has offered himself to her and is made vulnerable. Furthermore, as Bryant adds, it is when the narrator “recognizes that she and the Beast are (in their silence) ‘speaking’ the same speech of difference – a relationship to which there are no ideological strings of social/sexual expectation attached – that she feels ‘at liberty for the first time in [her] life” (Bryant 92, Carter 64).

The lesson of Carter’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” is not the simple one of faithfulness, selflessness, and martyrdom found in the original tale but one of acceptance, difference, mutuality, and an embracing of one’s inner ‘Other’ and animal desire without subjugation. Unlike the traditional tale of “Beauty and the Beast,” in this case it is Beauty who changes after finally finding her self. And like the painful process of experience faced by the narrator of “The Bloody Chamber,” the narrator of “The Tiger’s Bride” must go through the agony of stripping off her old skin and transforming into her inner animal as she gives birth to herself. The narrator can only come into her own once she realizes that her own subjectivity is contingent on her acceptance, understanding and absorption of the ‘Other’ into her own being.

In the appendix to *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, there is a section of notes concerning changes and additions Bakhtin would have liked to have made entitled “Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book.” Included in this appendix is a fascinating discussion of novels that depict a ‘self-developing life” where Bakhtin emphasizes the connections between dialogism and subjectivity at which he has hinted in several, if not all, of his works. He delves into the importance of the novel containing

“the interactions of many consciousnesses” because “the existence of single consciousness” would be an “impossibility” (287). When considering the relationship between self and other in the formation of subjectivity, it is necessary to see how, as Bakhtin illuminates on the topic, “the most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*)” (287). In artistic expression, this dialogism of the self often takes place in the form of confessional writing, an intrinsic part of the first-person ‘I’ narrative found in these postmodern women writers under discussion. For a work of satire, this confessional type of writing often includes a sense of urgency in forming and maintaining selfhood and agency against the socio-political institutions attempting to obliterate the self, but it is easy to forget that, in order for change to be made possible and for the objectified individual to gain agency as a subject, that which is outside the self, the ‘not me,’ must be an active presence and catalyst for subjectivity. Bakhtin notes:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another.... Separation, dissociation, and enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one’s self. Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the *boundary* between one’s own and someone else’s consciousness, on the *threshold*. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence.... The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion*. *To be* means *to communicate*. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered.... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*. (287)

While this creation of the ‘other’ in the form of the reader is implied in Carter’s first-person accounts, it is less stressed than the symbolic relationship of self and other presented through the narrators’ experiences with ‘others’ in the stories. In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, on the other hand, the urgency and need for that ‘other’ as a reader or listener to hear her story becomes the central issue for Offred, the narrating protagonist of the novel. Her survival and subjectivity literally and figuratively depend on her ability to tell her tale to others.

Contrasting the image of the ‘everyman’ in Orwell’s *1984*, Atwood constructs her protagonist through a deeply personal, individualized account of her experiences under the theocratic, authoritarian regime of Gilead. As a feminist work of dystopian literature, *The Handmaid’s Tale* might not directly come off as parody in its use of the masculine dystopian tradition, but the similarities and differences between the two novels are clear and purposeful, hinting at both the mimetic and contrarian elements throughout the text in relation to Atwood’s dystopian writer predecessors. Under the umbrella term of *sci-fi*, or more recently *SF* to include “speculative fiction” such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*,³ dystopian literature has a history of using women as peripheral characters. They are generally constructed as stereotypes, love interests, or plot devices to help move along

³ Atwood labels her novel as “speculative fiction,” refuting those who call it “science fiction” because, as she differentiates between the two terms: “I define science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today – that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that contain various technologies we have not yet developed. But in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or that it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries.... We’ve done it, or we’re doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place, and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion. So I think of *The Handmaid’s Tale* not as science fiction but as speculative fiction; and, more particularly, as that negative form of Utopian fiction that has come to be known as the Dystopia” (“Writing Utopia” 92-3).

the story or support the male protagonist's journey in some way. However, like with the fairy tale, there are those who insist on the already present potential in the genre for social critique and subversive strategy. Pamela Annas, for example, argues in "New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction," that sci-fi's focus on speculation and the questioning of 'reality' offers an alternative space that challenges and critiques those who maintain norms, absolute truths, and power structures. The genre of sci-fi opens the door for imagined alternatives to current social situations as it "envisions, creates an alternative world which comments on our own" (143). With this commentary on real issues affecting our present society, we can see how sci-fi is sympathetic to the rhetorical goals of satire, often criticizing social injustices and challenging restrictive norms through the displacement of time and space. As a subgenre of sci-fi, dystopian literature functions as a way to further exaggerate and call attention to the satire inherent in the genre.

Like sci-fi as a whole, the dystopian tradition has been an overwhelmingly male-dominated genre. There have been a few utopian works by women over the centuries, including Margaret Cavendish's 1666 *The Blazing World* and the feminist works of Lady Florence Dixie's *Gloriana* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, but there have been even fewer women dystopian writers. To be fair, it was not until the nineteenth century that dystopian fiction took hold as a prevalent genre, but the well-respected works generally known today that easily cross the boundary between popular fiction and those deemed worthy of literary study are all by men, most notably H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell. Barbara Hill Rigney affirms that "seldom have feminist

novelists chosen the satire and irony of the dystopia, that genre of literature which refutes the escapism of fantasy and represents confrontation with a possible reality” (143). With that said, and acknowledging the inaccuracy of Rigney’s statement about fantasy being escapist, the civil rights and women’s movements of the 1960s facilitated a more diverse revival of the dystopic novel and sci-fi in general, particularly favoring the satirical elements of and dire reality portrayed in the form. Kingsley Amis wrote in 1960, “Though it may go against the grain to admit it, science fiction writers are evidently satisfied with the sexual status quo” (99), and this problem changed significantly by the 1970s with writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler joining in the new ranks of women sci-fi writers with an overtly feminist agenda.

By the 1980s, Margaret Atwood entered the scene amidst the Thatcher-Reagan alliance that contributed to what she saw as the growing hostility toward feminism in England and the United States. Sarah Lefanu describes this socio-political climate as “promulgat[ing] an ethos of authoritarianism under the guise of ‘responsibility’” as censorship, morality, classism and traditional gender roles were reinforced under conservative leadership (7-8). Science fiction rose in popularity as a form of protest because it’s “plasticity” and it’s “openness to other literary genres allow an apparent contradiction, but one that is potentially of enormous importance to contemporary women writers” in that it “makes possible, and encourages (despite its colonisation by male writers) the inscription of women as subjects free from the constraints of mundane fiction” (Lefanu 9). Furthermore, and important for this study, science/speculative fiction “also offers the possibility of interrogating that very inscription, questioning the basis of

gendered subjectivity” (Lefanu 9). Much of this interrogation comes from science fiction’s ability to defamiliarize the familiar by placing the location and time outside the realm of present day reality, making the scene ripe for the analysis and deconstruction of normativity and systems of power.

Nonetheless, I see *speculative* fiction, particularly that which is dystopian in nature, working differently than Lefanu’s insistence on defamiliarization: instead of defamiliarizing the familiar, dystopian literature often familiarizes the unfamiliar to the point that the fictionalized atmosphere becomes indistinguishable in many ways from the present material reality faced by the characters.⁴ This familiarity gives speculative fiction its satiric power. Gilead, for example, is only a slight exaggeration from what women have experienced in strictly gendered, authoritarian regimes, and, even in societies where women have more autonomy, we can find the warning signs of authoritarianism. American history supplies the Gileadean regime’s repressive constructs through the examples of its puritanical past mixed with the contemporary political strife and rise of the religious right during the 1980s (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 162). Those in power in the novel, particularly the Aunts whose role is to control and brainwash the handmaids, allude to Evangelical interpretations of Biblical passages in support of women’s subordination. Offred’s memories of her mother’s protests during the 1960s further the sense of historical immediacy, underscoring the connections between our past and possible future.

⁴ Arnold E. Davidson makes a similar case when he says that the plot of *The Handmaid’s Tale* “plays to our sense of the familiar” and that “in a very real sense, the future presaged by *The Handmaid’s Tale* is already *our* history” (“Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” 116)

Peter Fitting states that “more recent fictions no longer give us images of a radically different future, in which the values and ideals of feminism have been extended to much of the planet, but rather offer depressing images of a brutal reestablishment of capitalist patriarchy” (142), and considering the perceived backlash against feminism, it comes as no surprise. Magali Michael argues that the proximity in time to that of the present reader “prevents the ‘suspension of disbelief’ that most works of speculative fiction require” (135). She continues:

By creating a lack of distance between the two societies...the novel disrupts the conventional demarcation between reality and fiction, between 1980s America and 1990s Gilead, thereby forcing readers to recognize seeds of the dystopian Gilead in 1980s American culture. (135)

With this tense historical moment of renewed oppression, writers need very little of a leap away from present reality to construct these frightening authoritarian structures. Women *know* Gilead; feminists *fear* the inevitability of its literal formation.

Many of the plot elements, and even a few structural elements, in *The Handmaid's Tale* are an obvious homage to the masculine dystopian tradition that had been pervasive in English literature; one can find a plethora of similarities between it and its predecessor, *1984*. Orwell's “Thought Police” are now “The Eyes,” and the state-sanctioned release of pent-up dissatisfaction changes from the “Two Minutes of Hate” to the “Participation,” where handmaids are allowed to beat supposed rapists (more than likely political dissidents) to death. Society is still compartmentalized into class hierarchies, although *The Handmaid's Tale* creates gendered separation with

Commanders and their Wives, the Econowives, the servant Marthas, the prostitutes at “Jezebel’s” (the government-sanctioned house of prostitution for the Commanders), the handmaids as surrogates, the matriarchal Aunts who control and brainwash the handmaids, and deviant women classified as “Unwomen” who are exiled to the colonies to dispose of radioactive waste. Typical of the dystopian literary tradition, Atwood’s novel includes a totalitarian regime and an undercurrent of tensions caused by continuous warring and fighting factions within the system. Offred tells her reader, “They only show us victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?” (Atwood 83), which parallels the control of information in Orwell’s dystopian vision. Also, like *1984*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* explores issues of power in all of its forms, notably “power as the prohibition...of human potential” (Malak 10). Just as what happens in the fairy tale, dystopian fiction blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality with an aim that “is neither to distort reality beyond recognition, nor to provide an escapist world for the reader” but to heighten the issues already present in society (Malak 10).

Larry Caldwell claims Atwood’s novel is paying an obvious, self-conscious and “ironic” debt to Orwell, but he draws similarities between the texts only to leave behind any solid discussion of the major differences (340). Just as is the case with *all* of the women writers of satire in this study, Atwood’s novel proves that parody and appropriation is always a double-edged sword as it upholds and challenges the texts that came before. Both Malak and Caldwell imply that the only difference that sets Atwood’s novel apart from the dystopian tradition is her feminist angle and concern for women’s rights; however, *The Handmaid’s Tale* stands on its just as much from its

narrative structure as its themes and ideology. While Malak argues that Atwood's novel constructs the same exaggerated binaries as other dystopian works, "dramatiz[ing] the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity" (10), in actuality Atwood deconstructs this separation between individual and society. Malak also claims that the novel places the themes of having too much choice and having too much prohibition in opposition with one another, but she misreads this novel's statement about "either/or," forgetting that it is not Atwood nor Offred who support such a dichotomy – it is the Gileadean regime and, more specifically, the Aunts who attempt to brainwash the handmaids into believing that these are the only two choices. As Offred sardonically observes after Aunt Lydia has told the handmaid to think "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege," Aunt Lydia is "in love with either/or" (8). And while there may be some truth to what the Aunts say about the violence and sexualization of women before Gilead, this is a purposefully distorted truth, a false sense of Utopia that says more about the problems inherent in 1980s American culture that would support violence against women than about how women should be prohibited from making choices that could put them in danger in such a culture.

Through their exaggerated, allegorical form in Offred's narrative, all binaries break down in *The Handmaid's Tale*, whether freedom versus imprisonment, victim versus victimizer, or fantasy versus reality. More importantly, what distinguishes Atwood's novel from that of past dystopian writers is her unwavering focus on the power of language, telling one's personal story and the necessity for an 'other' in connection with female subjectivity. It is Offred's first person account and subjective point of view

that disrupts the focus on objectivity and ‘truth’ found in earlier dystopian novels such as *1984*. Like Carter’s fairy tales, this revised focus highlights the questioning of what is ‘real’ through self-awareness in the storytelling process, drawing attention to itself as a constructed work of art with faulty memory, embellishments, and multiple ‘truths.’

In “Writing Utopia,” Atwood tells of the influence of dystopian fiction such as those by H.G. Wells and George Orwell on her own work, but she suggests a difference between her dystopian fiction and that of the masculine tradition. In many utopian and dystopian novels, the writing “so frequently stumbles into...the pitfalls of disquisition” instead of maintaining focus on “how to make the story real at a human and individual level” (100). She continues: “The author gets too enthusiastic about sewage systems or conveyor belts, and the story grinds to a halt while the beauties of these are explained. I wanted the factual and logical background to my tale to remain background; I did not want it usurping the foreground” (100). It is this personal element, this focus on the first person accounts over objective observation, that makes *The Handmaid’s Tale* stand out from the others. As Offred’s narrative beings, the reader is immediately confronted with issues of the relationship between self and other and establishes a connection with a narrator who often falls into feeling and nostalgic memories of the past:

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there.... There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over

lifting flesh. We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? (3)

The beginning reflects Atwood's interest in a certain kind of realism, not one of objectivity and detail for the sake of detail but to show "the texture of life as people live it, furniture, makeup, underwear and all" (Atwood qtd. in Thompson, 38). Offred's description is highly personalized, coming through the eyes and memory of the mysterious, unnamed narrator. At the same time, there is also a sense of community from the start, this need to feel a part of something beyond the individual when Offred repeatedly uses the first person plural pronoun "we." The reader understands that Offred is not alone in her experience, and she suggests the need for commonality when she projects her own feelings and desires onto her fellow handmaids.

Under the Gileadean regime, Offred and the other handmaids have been relegated to the traditional underling elements within the patriarchal system of binaries; they are body and object, only to be used as surrogates to continue the power structures supported by the regime. Denied subjectivity and agency, Offred's telling of her personal story, as well as the pleasure she gets from playing with the language which she has been denied, is the only method available for her to assert herself as an embodied *self*. She mixes wordplay and humor, reveling in her ability to revise the language of the oppressors – a common method in satire, particularly women's satire. In *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Booker explains the importance of language and dialogue in dystopian fiction. Because language is dialogic, it can never be completely controlled or contained, no matter how dystopian regimes depend on "authoritative language" in an

attempt to stifle the play and freedom of dialogue. Booker asserts, “Thus, the very nature of language itself indicates that there will always be a possibility that opposing voices can arise, even if they must do so through parodic manipulation of the language of authority” (19). Therefore, language can be a means of oppression but also liberation when the oppressed use it to their advantage.

The Handmaid’s Tale examines the different ways objects are defined; it is the ability to define that gives agency and power to the speaker. One of the ways Offred maintains her subjectivity is by taking back ownership of the language Gilead denies her through wordplay and punning. For example, Offred ironically plays on the word for the oppressive attire she is forced to wear that signifies her status as a fertile body. She says, “Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break” (24-5), implying that these costumes represent both an unyielding shackle and dangerous practice needing correction. The red habits the handmaids wear suggest female (often sexual) indiscretion, whether alluding to “Little Red Riding Hood,”⁵ the sexual indiscretions of Hester Prynne⁶, or the female sex organs of the handmaid. By playing with the various meanings attached to her costume and the word *habit*, she unmask and ridicules the ways in which the regime controls her.

⁵ Sharon Rose Wilson explores fairy tale motifs in *The Handmaid’s Tale* with a focus on “Little Red Riding Hood” in *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. She points out the similarities in dress, including Offred’s carrying a basket while shopping, markers intended to direct the reader’s attention to the intertextual layering.

⁶ In *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* Nancy Walker argues that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an ironic revision of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* in that both works “illuminate the persistence of certain cultural realities: the use of fundamentalist religious doctrine as a justification for political repression, the distance between official rhetoric and the ‘truth’ of actual life, and the use of women as cultural symbols” (151).

According to Griffin, “The satirist seems almost to forget the target and to delight instead in the range, inventiveness and even the euphony of abusive vocabulary” (19). Although Atwood never forgets her target, she and her narrator certainly find power in objectionable language and blasphemy. Offred tells her audience

There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It’s like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. (222)

The old adage ‘language is power’ takes multiple meanings here because Offred not only defies the Gileadean regime by speaking at all but denounces its conservative moralizing by using profanity, “deflating” those who subordinate the marginalized and powerless. These obscenities further connect to the overall dark humor prevalent throughout Offred’s narrative as well. Keith Booker recognizes the “considerable parody and humor” as a factor that distinguishes *The Handmaid’s Tale* from the dystopian tradition (*The Dystopian Impulse* 142). One of the many memories Offred has of the indoctrination she experienced under the supervision of the Aunts recalls these issues of dark humor, wordplay, and redefinition. She remembers Aunt Lydia teaching the handmaids to think of themselves as pearls, euphemistically referencing their special quality and purity as purposeful, reproductive bodies. Offred dismantles the loftiness of such a meaning, thinking of the other reality that pearls are nothing but “congealed oyster spit” (114).

Offred takes immense pleasure in cutting the regime down to size through humor and irony. In his influential essay on humor and laughter, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud advances this idea of the power of language and pleasure, especially when connected to humor: “by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him” (103). He distinguishes between “innocent jokes” and “tendentious jokes,” or jokes with a purpose, arguing

the pleasurable effect of innocent jokes is as a rule a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearer... A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible. Since the technique of both can be the same a suspicion may be aroused in us that tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access. (Freud 139-40)

Griffin explains how satire uses this theory of the tendentious joke: it “bring[s] pleasure by enabling us to evade obstacles to our expression of hostility. Those obstacles may be either external, a powerful person whom we cannot safely attack, or internal – the prohibitions produced in us” by society (Griffin 162). Rarely will a reader find jokes in dystopian fiction due to the seriousness of the subject matter; however, Offred repeatedly uses her wordplay and wry sense of humor for comic effect. As is often the case in social satire attacking oppressive systems of power, the tendentious joke in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is always dark and cutting with grim undertones.

One instance of Offred’s penchant for tendentious jokes is when she mocks the confines of her red habit, merging her present self with that of the past: “I never looked

good in red, it's not my color" (8). This short, ironic joke speaks volumes if we consider not only her act of language play and finding humor despite her oppression, but even more importantly her acknowledgement of personal preference. In reasserting her dislike of the color red, she pronounces herself as a self distinct from her present situation and the expectations placed on her by the regime. Furthermore, this self harks back to a time when women had a choice as to what they wore, one of the many things Gilead has taken away from its citizens. Offred also finds morbid humor in the religiosity and absurd ritualism of the Ceremony, the act of fertilization that basically amounts to the rape of the handmaid by the Commander. Offred recalls how, as the Commander read from the Old Testament before the ritualized rape occurs, his wife, Serena Joy, broke down in tears but attempted to control the sound "to preserve her dignity, in front of us" (90). Offred remarks, "The tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible. It's like a fart in church. I feel, as always, the urge to laugh, but not because I think it's funny" (90). The situation is certainly not funny, but the absurdity of the situation and Offred's enjoyment of her inappropriate simile warrants an uncomfortable chuckle from her listener, not to mention the fact that no one seems to be enjoying or benefiting from the grotesque, distorted ritual that is the Ceremony, regardless of the euphemisms involved in trying to legitimize such a heinous act. Although not funny, Offred can never resist an inappropriate metaphor or simile, thumbing her nose at those who hold power over her.

Offred's love of language shifts into even darker territory when she describes her body as various inanimate objects that serve the purpose of containment. She lists

several metaphors for the body, including “two-legged wombs,” “sacred vessels,” “ambulatory chalices” – she has lost all sense of self, and her body has become nothing but a container for the production of future Gileadeans (136). Offred remembers that this was not always the case. Earlier in her narrative she says, “I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will.... There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me” (73). Now, under Gilead, “the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object” (73-4). Knowing that agency is constructed through both language and the body, Offred secretly defies Gilead’s attempts to keep her a disembodied object, taking control over her body when she can. When walking in the view of the young Guardians, she sways her hips back and forth to tease them, knowing that they, too, have been denied the pleasures of the body. She “enjoy[s] the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there” (22). Gilead would like to remove all aspects of the body that are not useful for maintaining their power. Aunt Lydia tells the handmaids, “Modesty is invisibility” (28), the mantra of sexual oppression for women who are *always* associated with the body and the patriarchal attempts to silence women.

The French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous perceives this struggle between language, the body and the self in a system that attempts to deny women the power of all three. She demands women write their bodies, make them visible through their language so as to not be erased, not be made invisible. In “Sorties,” she declares that women “have turned away from our bodies. Shamefully we have been taught to be unaware of them, to lash them with stupid modesty” (95). Only in language that “bursts partitions, classes,

and rhetoric's orders and codes," that "go beyond the discourse with its last reserves, including the one of laughing off the word 'silence'" and any other oppressive words that demand finality can women take back power (95). She maintains, "it is not a question of appropriating their instruments, their concepts, their places for oneself or of wishing oneself in their position of mastery.... Not taking possession to internalize or manipulate but to shoot through and small walls" (96). In this act of destruction, women writers take pleasure in "scrambling spatial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things, and values around, breaking it, emptying structures, turning the self same, the proper upside down (96). This is what it means to write *l'écriture féminine*, to write one's self into the role of embodiment and subjectivity, and this is the struggle Offred endures as she reconstructs her painful history, no matter how fragmented her story may be to those looking for phallogocentric standards, deconstructs the meanings of Gilead, and laughs in the face of oppression.

In Offred's world, a world in which she is completely silenced, the only pleasure she has left is through language, moments of dark humor, and small rebellious acts, and this *jouissance* is inextricably linked to her quest for subjectivity. As Chris Ferns explains, "Laughter is both an assertion of independent identity, of an alternative mode of perceiving reality, and part of a larger mechanism whereby the individual reclaims experience and endows it with a personal significance" (378-9). This reclaiming is central to Offred's development – a reclaiming of the self that blends with her relationship to others. According to Nancy Reincke, it is the action of the joke and not

simply the content that empowers women by creating community and commonality. She states

Women's laughter counteracts dominance when it constructs a counterknowledge, a counterknowledge that is collectively produced through female bonding across barriers of class and race. The threat to male dominance isn't women laughing at men; the threat is women laughing *with* women. (36)

This need for communal laughter is why Offred repeatedly tells her listener that she must remember to tell Moira her funny jokes and wordplays that dismantle the validity of the regime. The utterance in isolation holds no subversive power without the presence of another.

Similar to the metafictional accounts found in *The Bloody Chamber* but taking the memory narrative even further, harking back to the stream of consciousness techniques found in Virginia Woolf, Atwood depends on metafictional narrative strategies of fragmentation and authorial intrusion to show the subjective mind and the disjointedness of memory. These techniques of metafiction call into question the narratorial objectivity of masculine dystopias. Offred repeatedly reminds her reader that she is constructing her narrative from scraps of memories and moments of imagination when memory fails. She draws attention to her narrative as a subjective construction through flashbacks, flash forwards, tangents, dream sequences, fragments of thought, and creative liberties, sometimes from faulty memory, sometimes from nostalgic flashbacks that intrude, and at other times because she finds pleasure in the addition of imagined details. She also

constructs her narrative as a testament to the multiplicity of the self as she can hold multiple beliefs at once, of conflicting possibilities simultaneously.

For example, when thinking back to her family's attempt to flee during the rise of Gilead, Offred constructs three different versions of what could have possibly happened to Luke. She admits, "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at once and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything" (106). Offred's narrative is self-conscious, bringing attention to itself as not entirely reliable, but this is the actuality of speaking of one's self. She insists:

It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many. (134)

From her subjective memories and desires, Offred admits that she does not always know what happened, but she draws attention to the fact that she is not omniscient, that she cannot know everything or remember exactly how it happened. This is the human condition and, for Offred, this is her reality. She takes control over her narrative, making it her own in the face of a society that writes their story on to her. As the creator of her text, she admits that she has taken creative liberties, such as her inclusion of the flowers, which gives her some pleasure and lessens the sadness and pain found in her story. She also hopes these moments of positive imagery and humor are pleasurable for her reader, just as the words of others have been for her.

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin writes

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated – over-populated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (*Dialogic Imagination* 294)

We have seen how Offred has had to struggle with the language of Gilead, resisting its definitions placed on her while also playing with those definitions as both a source of pleasure and subjectivity. Although Roxanne Fand applies this to Atwood’s other novels and excludes *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her statement about the creation of subjectivity is highly relevant to Offred’s situation as well: “In each [novel] the heroine is something of a blank page to herself, but by going through a redefining experience...manages to inscribe something meaningful that at least gives her enough direction not to become totally lost” (168). Offred’s redefining comes through her own voice and her creation of her self through narrative control, and she does so through her dialogic relationship with others as she speaks for herself and the ‘other,’ within and between characters, showing how all have been influenced by the external world.

The previous occupant of her room is one such ‘other’ to whom Offred imagines a connection through language and finds strength and pleasure. While in her chamber, she finds the Latin phrase *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* scratched in the floor of the closet, which we later learn from the Commander means “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” (52). At this point in her narrative, Offred does not know the meaning of the

phrase, but she does not need to: she finds pleasure in having found it at all, savoring the act of rebellious communication with an other. She tells her listener:

It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman.... It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. (52)

Just as Offred becomes a living self through her telling of her story to us and through the words she has gathered from others, the previous occupant becomes a self through Offred's spreading her words and imagining her being. This is not the first time Offred wills an other; she constructs a "You" so as to give a reason for her continued speech:

A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands. (40)

The need to connect to someone outside of the self in order to tell one's story is made apparent in this metafictional moment when Offred addresses her imagined audience. In Gilead, to have an audience is to not be invisible; to not be invisible is to be alive. In one of her many puns, Offred explains how she writes herself into her story: "I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose as one composes a speech" (66), not only meaning she must gain control over her emotions but also implying that she is having to create a self, a self that performs in order to survive. With the aid of the

‘other’ in the form of the reader, Offred composes her selfhood because her story, and therefore her self, lives on.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler maintains that the relationship between the speaking self, the ‘I,’ and the other, the ‘You,’ allows for ethical involvement despite the inevitable instability found in personal narrative. Her argument emphasizing the importance of that which is outside the individual self certainly echoes Bakhtin’s ideas about language and subjectivity. We must rethink of the self as dialogic, constantly interrupted by the other and always affected by prior social structures. In other words, giving an account of one’s self, the ‘I,’ is always needing the other, the ‘you,’ whether that ‘you’ is actual or imagined. Ultimately, speaking is always speaking-to because language, according to Bakhtin and Butler, depends on the social context and relationships to others. As Butler insists, “the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making” (21). Agency through speaking, then, is not dependent on the Hegelian philosophy of the unified ‘free subject,’ and the subject’s ethical role in the world is not based on an essential selfhood but the exposure to others, an exposure that is open-ended. An ethical relationship between self and other involves the not closing-down of the narrative regardless of its wandering; since narrative depends on the other, it is also not the closing down of dialogue. It is within this dialogic relationship where meaning and ‘truth’ is multiplied, made diverse, and constantly in flux.

Butler continues to explain the significance of the ‘I’-‘You’ relationship: “...if I tell the story to a ‘you,’ that other is implied not only as an internal feature of the

narrative but also as an irreducibly exterior condition and trajectory of the mode of address” (38). This connects the account-giver to the social situation in which she is speaking, a necessity for the construction of selfhood. She writes:

So, I try to begin a story about myself, and I begin somewhere, marking a time, trying to begin a sequence, offering, perhaps, casual links or at least narrative structure. I narrate, and I blind myself as I narrate, give an account of myself, offer an account to an other in the form of a story that might well work to summarize how and why I am. (65-66)

However, this constructed story alone does not make for a unified, fully-knowable self; there is a reflexive quality in the performance of composing one’s self. In the moment, it is impossible to form a coherent understanding of identity:

...as I make a sequence and link one event with another, offering motivations to illuminate the bridge, making patterns clear, identifying certain events or moments of recognition as pivotal, even marking certain recurring patterns as fundamental, I do not merely communicate something about my past, though that is doubtless part of what I do. *I also enact the self I am trying to describe; the narrative ‘I’ is reconstituted at every moment it is invoked in the narrative itself.* That invocation is, paradoxically, a performative and non-narrative act, even as it functions as the fulcrum for narrative itself. I am, in other words, doing something with that ‘I’ – elaborating and positioning it in relation to a real or imagined audience – which is something other than telling a story about it, even though ‘telling’ remains part of what I do. (66, my emphasis)

Butler acknowledges the impact the listener has on the account of oneself, supplying her own knowledge and experience on to the narrative. In giving an account of oneself, the act is truly a ‘giving’ – the ‘I’ is giving agency to the ‘You,’ and vice versa: the speaker opens herself up to the interpretations and meanings given back by the other person, also opening herself up to judgment, misunderstandings, or acceptance (Butler 67).

Importantly, when considering the first-person narrators in Carter's postmodern fairy tales and Atwood's revision of dystopian fiction, this relationship between self and other is what allows these women to grow as subjects. It is a continual process of becoming in that a personal account "does not have as its goal the establishment of a definitive narrative but constitutes a linguistic and social occasion for self-transformation" (130). As shown in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narrative is contingent on her creation of a 'You.' She says:

But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place... By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (268)

She needs the other outside of herself to spur on the narrative, and the narrative allows her subjectivity and agency. She might not be able to explicitly act in rebellion against the Gileadean regime within her social situation, but her act of telling is still the political act of maintaining the self within a system that denies it.

Much has been said about the ironic twist at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and it deserves further attention considering both the parodic function of the novel and its impact as a satirical work. After an ambiguous ending to Offred's narrative that leaves it open as to whether or not she will escape, the reader encounters a jarring shift in language from Offred's highly metaphorical and personal style to that of the more impersonal style of an academic convention held about two hundred years in the future.

We learn that Gilead did eventually fall, and we know that Offred did escape because the tapes onto which she recorded her story have survived. The keynote speaker is Professor Pieixoto, who proceeds to lecture his audience on the “Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (300). We also learn through Pieixoto’s talk that what they have is not the story in its original form; it has been reconstructed by a group of scholars, manipulated and appropriated to reflect their own agendas.

Peter Fitting makes the claim that the ending “Historical Notes” section of the novel is optimistic because “[t]he additional knowledge provided by the frame – that this society has come to an end – tells the reader not to worry” (151). In contrast to Fitting’s reading, I agree with those who note that the “Historical Notes” section is far from optimistic and could be considered the most powerful moment of ironic satire in the entire novel, extending the dystopian critique far beyond the development within Offred’s actual narrative. As Booker asserts, the seeds of sexism are still present two hundred years into the future (*Dystopian Impulse* 167). Academics tell tasteless jokes about women’s weakness, belittling Offred’s experience and attempts at agency as Professor Pieixoto refers to “The Underground Femaleroad” as “The Underground Frailroad” (Atwood 301). We also learn that Offred’s story has been reconstructed from unmarked tapes, leading male scholars to question the reliability of her story while implying that her story is not her own but the handy work of those with the power to reconstruct it.

Coral Ann Howells makes the solid argument that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a “dissident dystopia” in that while it “shares many of the thematic features of traditional models of the genre, it subverts the masculine dystopian fascination with institutional

politics or military tactics by focusing on the silenced Others in Gilead” (143). This parallels Woolf’s agenda in both *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* when she refuses to discuss the “Great Men” of history and instead focuses on the “moments of being” of the everyday people. In cold, dismissive academic language, the reader is told in the “Historical Notes” that, because it is a personal story with no supportable factual data, we must question the validity and authenticity of Offred’s story – a critique Atwood is making about how academia dehumanizes the subjects for which they speak while denying women their voices. Professor Pieixoto dismantles the veracity of her story by pointing out improbabilities and inaccuracies: “It has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquility, at least *post facto*” (303). Furthermore, he expresses disappointment that her story didn’t cover the stereotypical ‘great men of history.’ More interested in the missing substantiated facts about the Commander and other leaders within Gilead, Pieixoto laments, “[s]ome of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy” (Atwood 310).

Howells rightfully recognizes that Offred’s narrative, “with all its gaps and confessions of unreliability” challenges Professor Pieixoto’s “deterministic view of history and the role of historiography as authentication of the past, in favor of something far more arbitrary and subjectively reconstructed” (Howells 143). However, this is exactly Atwood’s point in including the “Historical Notes:” the calling into question the superiority of ‘fact’ and ‘objectivity’ over the subjective experiences of women. The entire point of Offred’s narrative and its emotional impact for both herself and her reader

fall on deaf ears, to be completely lost on a group of people who appear to be continuing the cycle of oppression that led to Offred's story in the first place. If we were unaware of the near impossible struggle for Offred to construct herself as a lasting subject while under the power of Gilead, we now see that not much has changed over the centuries despite Gilead's fall. Even more frightening is that the style and structure of the academic conference feels too present, too real. The reader recognizes the same structures in existence today in the uncomfortable, impersonal, dehumanizing talk at the academic conference portrayed in the novel.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Degradation...means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better.

- Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* leaves us on a bleak note, we must remember the pleasure and power created by both narrator and author as female perspectives are finally allowed a voice in genres that tend to ignore women's subjective experience. In my discussion of carnival in chapter three, I mention the criticism that carnival is a state-sanctioned form of transgression. Satire itself may be labeled as such because, as a long-established and accepted literary form, it allows a measure of safety for the writer who mocks those in power. During the twentieth century, satire became so commonplace as to lose much of its shock value and revolutionary ability. What this critique ignores, however, is the transformative power of including marginalized voices that have been ignored in discussions about satire.

If we consider Bakhtin's theories pertaining to Menippean satire, including dialogism, carnival, and the creation of subjectivity through the interrelationship between self and other, and infuse these theories with characteristics of women's writing such as playful irony and tongue-in-cheek humor, we see that, although working within the system, women satirists open the door to new possibilities and changes within the

established forms they use. They challenge the existing state of literary study and offer new ways of (re)reading without the overt didacticism and pedantry of other forms of political writing.

Using satirical elements such as parody, irony, and humor, and infusing them with the female perspective, women satirists of the twentieth century fight for new literary interpretations, challenging the hierarchies within the literary tradition that trivialize women's writing and experience. Thinking of parody in the framework of carnival, it helps to consider Bruner's rebuttal to those who denounce the liberatory power of carnival:

while the inversion of hierarchies, the reversal of binaries, and the wearing of masks...can serve to reinforce political order, they are also ultimately capable of serving a much greater purpose: allowing subjects to enter a liminal realm of freedom and in so doing create a space for critique that would otherwise not be possible in 'normal' society. (140)

Or, as Atwood puts it, "putting new wine in old bottles," especially to the point of rupture. When women take hold of satiric methods and parody genres within the literary tradition, they are, in fact, creating new spaces for critiquing the dominant order. Satire and parody are essential to women writers of the twentieth century, and the works of Virginia Woolf, Stella Gibbons, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood serve as examples of the central role exaggeration and imitation play in how women challenge old ways of writing and thinking.

In the spirit of the women writers included in this study, I have abstained from offering a straightforward definition of what constitutes 'women's satire,' refusing to add

to those absolutists who have attempted fixed genre definitions and closed systems of thought. This study in no way means to further traditional frameworks but, instead, serves as a recovery project outlining certain shared characters I have found in works by twentieth century women writers. My goal has been to interrupt the misconception that satire is incompatible with women writers and show how women satirists use “the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.” Instead of placing restrictions on either satire or women’s writing, I hope to have shown that satire can be made abstract, ambiguous, communal, and radical in the hands of women writers – attributes far from the violent, authoritative, conservative genre many traditionalist critics would have us believe. With the hybrid nature of women’s satirical works, classification will continue to be a near impossibility, but here’s hoping that we can overlook such simplistic ways of thinking to embrace the many ways in which women’s satire takes shape in twentieth century literature.

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