

**Subversive Narrative and Thematic Strategies:  
A Critical Appraisal of Fay Weldon's Fiction**

by

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## Summary

Fay Weldon is a popular, prolific author whose oeuvre stretches from 1967 to the present and includes 20 novels, three collections of short stories and numerous stage, radio and television plays, scripts and adaptations. This thesis limits itself to her fiction and follows the chronological course of Weldon's writing career in five chapters.

Fay Weldon's fiction, situated at the intersection of postmodernism and feminism, is doubly subversive. It both overturns 'reasonable' narrative conventions and wittily deconstructs the specious terminology used to define women. Weldon's disobedient female protagonists - madwomen, criminals, outcasts and she-devils - assert the power of the Other. Gynocentric themes - single parenthood, sisterhood, reproduction, motherhood, sex and marriage - are transformed by Weldon into uproarious feminist revenge comedy. This she achieves through an intertextuality which often involves unorthodox typography, genre-swapping and metafictional devices. Moreover, a unique ventriloquism enables her omniscient first-person narrators to mimic 'Fay Weldon' herself.

Since her narrators are rebels and iconoclasts, Weldon has always been viewed as a subversive individual worthy of media attention, especially interviews. For this reason, and because she is a woman writer who struggled initially against social and domestic odds, the thesis incorporates in its argument the author's biography and public personae.

Chapter One explores the connections between Weldon's first novels - notably *Down Among the Women* (1971) - and early liberationist and anthropological feminism. In Chapter Two, Bakhtin's dialogic imagination and Derrida's *différance* provide the basis for a discussion of multiplicity in Weldon's novels of the late 1970s, particularly *Praxis* (1979), shortlisted for the Booker prize. Chapter Three tests the limits of a psychoanalytical model in accounting for Weldon's novels of (m)Otherhood, including *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983).

Theories of humour and carnival inform Chapter Four's analysis of how Weldon's wit - at its tendentious best in *The Heart of the Country* (1987) - declines into innocence. Finally, Chapter Five sees Weldon's flagging literary reputation as the symptom of authorial exhaustion and retreat from a feminist agenda. This concluding chapter is, however, ultimately optimistic that the mercurial author's undeniable talents may reassert themselves.

**Key terms:** Weldon, Fay; literary criticism; women novelists; women's writing; twentieth-century authors, British; narrative; narrative strategies; theme; feminist literature; subversion.

# Contents

**Acknowledgments**  
**Key to Abbreviations**

<b>Introduction</b>	1
Endnotes	24
<b>Chapter One</b>	27
Endnotes	56
<b>Chapter Two</b>	58
Endnotes	96
<b>Chapter Three</b>	99
Endnotes	134
<b>Chapter Four</b>	138
Endnotes	171
<b>Chapter Five</b>	173
Endnotes	194
<b>Bibliography</b>	199

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## **Key to Abbreviations**

<i>DAW</i>	<i>Down Among the Women</i>
<i>GR</i>	<i>Growing Rich</i>
<i>HC</i>	<i>The Heart of the Country</i>
<i>HLM</i>	<i>The Hearts and Lives of Men</i>
<i>LA</i>	<i>Letters to Alice on first Reading Jane Austen</i>
<i>LB</i>	<i>Leader of the Band</i>
<i>PB</i>	<i>Puffball</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>The President's Child</i>
<i>PX</i>	<i>Praxis</i>
<i>RM</i>	<i>Remember Me</i>
<i>RW</i>	<i>Rebecca West</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>The Shrapnel Academy</i>
<i>S-D</i>	<i>The Life and Loves of a She-Devil</i>

## Introduction

Personally, I see critics as bus drivers. They ferry the visitors round the City of Invention and stop the bus here or there, at whim, and act as guides, and feel that if it were not for them, there would be no City.

*Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*  
(1984:111)

Mind you, they'll say anything.

*Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*  
(1984:42)

Fay Weldon's fiction is fascinatingly situated at the intersection of postmodernism and feminism. Postmodernist theorists have demonstrated the falsity of all supremacist positions, for example, the hierarchically superior position of art over mass culture and the formerly inflexible belief that reason can ascertain transcendental 'truths' from which one should not sway. In his response to the Enlightenment model of philosophical and scientific enquiry, Jean-François Lyotard - pioneer of postmodernist thinking - is incredulous toward master narratives:

The postmodern would be that ... which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable ... . A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle bound by preestablished rules, and they

cannot be judged according to a predetermining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.

(1984:81)

Not surprisingly, postmodernism has been accused of being anarchical, self-indulgent and popular. But as Ihab Hassan argues, this is because it is

... essentially subversive in form and anarchic in its cultural spirit. It dramatizes its lack of faith in art even as it produces new works of art intended to hasten both cultural and artistic dissolution.

(1975:200)

There may be a rationale for *not* producing a thesis on Fay Weldon's fiction, but it would depend upon precisely those strategies of legitimation despised by postmodernists. Her novels and short stories have shown a marked decline in recent years; she is undeniably a popular rather than literary author and, unlike many respected contemporary women novelists (A.S.Byatt, Alison Lurie, Margaret Forster), she has not pursued an academic career in literature which might have enriched her work with learned allusions, drawing an appreciative audience of fellow intellectuals. Indeed, Weldon is overtly commercial in her fictional enterprise (writing or adapting for television whenever the opportunity arises) and in journalistic efforts and interviews reveals herself as flippant, imprecise and inconsistent. These reasons may well explain why no full-length study of Fay Weldon yet exists: they are also the very reasons why I believe such an investigation to be imperative.

Fay Weldon is worthy of contemplation, one might argue, precisely because she takes neither art nor herself seriously. But if Weldon's popular and topical inclinations and her perpetually revisionist - occasionally even contradictory - stance make her a postmodern writer, then the equally valid claim that her writing is feminist may need some explanation. The compatibility between feminism and postmodernism is not immediately discernible. The rigours of feminism - its weeding out of prejudicial notions, its apparently humourless pursuit of justice and its tendency to locate single causes of oppression - such as patriarchy or reproductive biology - would seem to refute postmodernism's delight in playfulness

and plurality. Yet as Flax (1987) and Nicholson (1990) have shown, feminism shares postmodernism's wariness of narratives that claim unassailable legitimacy, and indeed, of all constant, transcendental notions of the self, truth and knowledge.

This being so, there is no reason why a feminist writer, in the course of her social commentary, might not also produce uproarious wit by tilting at the purveyor of truth and knowledge: narrative itself. Upending conventions, stretching credulity, reversing expectation, frankly playing with beginnings, middles and endings, these are some of Fay Weldon's subversive (postmodernist) strategies. The butt of these ludic strategies is, in Weldon's case, women's oppression. Single parenthood, sisterhood, reproduction and mothering, heterosexual sex, marriage and divorce, infidelity and revenge, woman-turned-demon, madness and rejection are Fay Weldon's main gynocentric themes. They reflect feminism's enduring interest in gender relations and the vexed question of how women connect to culture on the one hand and to nature on the other. The title of this thesis indicates that Weldon's oeuvre is subversive not only in a postmodernist sense of overturning 'reasonable' narrative conventions, but in a feminist sense of interrogating the myths, stereotypes or just plain lies that society uses in defining - and ultimately confining - women.<sup>1</sup>

Fay Weldon has never written a novel, or even part of one, from the point of view of a man. This immediately distinguishes her from other contemporary women writers - Bernice Rubens or Jennifer Johnston, for example - who have managed to achieve a male perspective with ease. Though she shares Beryl Bainbridge's predilection for black comedy, her style is not as reserved or as meticulous as the author of *Injury Time* and *An Awfully Big Adventure*. Weldon relishes the supernatural, but has never attempted magic realism, as have Angela Carter or Emma Tennant. Even in her most sober moments, Fay Weldon eschews the subtlety and pathos of an Anita Brookner or a Susan Hill.<sup>2</sup> But what really makes Fay Weldon unique - and this thesis justified - is her writing career itself, not as an autonomously unfolding phenomenon, but as an entity constructed, and just as readily deconstructed, by the author herself.

The tale of how this single parent and struggling copywriter made good on television and in print is public knowledge, thanks to Weldon's cheerfully confessional approach to interviews. The interviews have in turn become further narratives generated by Fay Weldon. Her personality projects itself even into her fictions where snippets of autobiography, and the apparent ventriloquism of her omniscient first-person narrators, convince even seasoned reviewers that here, yet again, Fay Weldon speaks. But who is Fay Weldon? In this thesis I discover that talking about the author is both necessary (because she is apparently such a forceful presence) and impossible (because she is a projection, a persona or an absence).

Because Fay Weldon is an eclectic writer, this thesis draws on a wide range of theoretical positions within both feminism and postmodernism. Furthermore, because my study is chronological, and Fay Weldon has always been driven by whatever ideas are current and topical, I have tried wherever possible to establish connections between issues in her novels and contemporaneous theory. So, for example, my first chapter - which covers the early novels up to 1975 - makes no mention of Derrida (whose work had not yet been substantially translated into English), but draws on the early liberationist feminism of Friedan, Greer and Millett and the anthropological feminism of Ortner. In Chapter Two, Bakhtin's dialogic imagination and Derrida's *différance* provide the basis for my discussion of multiplicity in Weldon's novels of the late 1970s. At this point I also introduce Dinnerstein's thesis on cultural taboos surrounding women, which provides a useful link with Chapter Three's Lacanian discussion of the Other.

Chapter Four turns to Freud, Umberto Eco, as well as feminist critics for its consideration of jokes and the carnivalesque in Weldon. Here I propose that a shift in her perspective on humour may be partially responsible for Weldon's decline. Finally, Chapter Five adopts an essentially Derridean position on the author's work, while begging only to differ with the poststructuralists' aversion to any talk of the author 'himself'. As Fay Weldon is still alive and writing (three new titles are due for publication after the completion of this thesis),<sup>3</sup> a conclusion *per se* did not seem

appropriate. Instead, Chapter Five is largely retrospective, dwelling on Weldon's recent failures mainly in order to show how they miss the very targets she hit so accurately before.

My intention in writing this thesis, then, is not to heap praise on particular texts or to reflect on the gradual rise to well-deserved fame of a committed feminist author who has studied her craft. Fay Weldon certainly does not answer such requirements. Instead, a study of her fiction raises several issues of general relevance to contemporary writing and criticism. The role of the media in presenting both author and oeuvre, the position of the woman writer vis-à-vis feminism, the confrontation of feminism and postmodernism, the question of popular versus 'high' art forms, and the emergence of the author as public oracle, all need to be considered in relation to Fay Weldon's considerable literary output.<sup>4</sup> So considerable, in fact, that this thesis has of necessity not included drama and other genres but has been limited to the writer's fiction, in particular her novels. Another limitation is dictated by the fact that Fay Weldon continues to be prolific. A cut-off date of 1992 was chosen in order to avoid the dangers of superficiality and haste. I have however made glancing references to work published between 1992 and the completion of this thesis.

\* \* \*

At the time of writing, Fay Weldon has to her credit three collections of short stories, 20 novels, more than 25 stage, radio and television plays, in addition to episodes of popular series, several television adaptations (including Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* and Erica Jong's *Fanny*), as well as film and television adaptations of her own novels (*The Heart of the Country*, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, *The Cloning of Joanna May*).<sup>5</sup> Her prolific output (a new Fay Weldon title appeared annually between 1987 and 1993) may explain why of all her novels only *Praxis* (1978) reached the list of Booker Prize finalists. As Professor Kossick suggests, 'Perhaps the truth of the matter is that Fay Weldon

has been through a phase of producing too much too quickly' (1989:33). She may be seen to write for sales rather than literary success, and her comment in my first epigraph suggests a disparaging attitude toward the English departments and literary critics who largely determine that success.<sup>6</sup> The apparent lack of subtlety in her writing, which probably accounts in no small measure for her popular success, must also play its part in this failure to achieve intellectual acclaim. After all, is a writer worthy of accolade who 'over many years ... has both enthralled and infuriated her female audience while delivering loud partisan bangs and some farts at male expense' (Waugh, 1992:34)?

Another possibility exists here, however, and it has to do with Fay Weldon's method of literary production. While serialization of novels in popular newspapers or periodicals, or their dissemination through the circulating library, never jeopardized the value of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novels, the fact that *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967), *The Heart of the Country* (1988), and *Growing Rich* (1992) started life on television, and that *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987) was initially serialized in *Woman* magazine, has cast doubt upon Fay Weldon's status as a literary writer. Weldon has always seen this process as beneficial. In *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* she makes a direct comparison between Austen's 'consciousness of audience' (1984:62), derived from reading her work aloud, and her own awareness of audience built up through television work. Nevertheless, the perception of Stanley Reynolds, reviewing *The Heart of the Country*, is a prevalent one:

With a most suspicious speed Fay Weldon's new novel is transferring this very night to the box in the sitting room .... Was Fay Weldon asked to do the TV series first? And if she was, does it not mean that there is something second-rate about this new novel - most of us, after all, possess sentimental notions of the novelist sitting in a room of his or her own, writing for the printed page. We consider it, and quite rightly, a higher art form than the telly.

(1987:44)

The fact that Reynolds goes on to say that 'it is almost impossible for her to write badly' only underlines the paradox inherent in his argument, no doubt derived from a distorted reverence for the romantic image of English writers - Chatterton and Keats, for example - who died destitute and unrecognized. Fay Weldon may have achieved financial success, but when she began writing - as a propagandist and then copywriter - it was simply in order to earn a living. She did not have a room of her own: 'her first serious writing took place under the kitchen table which was the only clear space she could find' (Anon, *Fair Lady*, 1987:77), and at one stage had to get up early in the morning (before work, before her children woke up) to do any writing at all.<sup>7</sup> In an interview with *Time* (1970:56) early in her career, Weldon explained how she would try to get through the household chores by midmorning before turning to the typewriter. These conditions, combined with her upbringing in an exclusively female household, and the coincidence of her early writing endeavours with the Women's Liberation movement, contributed inevitably to the feminist agenda of her early fiction. Flora Alexander rightly says, 'she was writing about women before it became fashionable to do so' (1989:51).

John Naughton claims in a review of *Watching Me, Watching You* in *The Listener*, 'Fay Weldon's fiction is generally bleak territory for the male chauvinist psyche' (1981:717). Critics and reviewers agree that her readership consists principally of women, but this does not imply that men disregard her. The extent to which she is suspected of subversion is evident in her remark to John Haffenden that she knows of a woman in Belgium who reads her novels 'while shut in the loo because her husband forbids her to read them' (1985:315). Male reviewers have variously described her works as 'retaliatory sexism', 'persuasive aversion therapy against the male sex' (Lasdun, 1981:22), 'sexist political tract[s]' (Reynolds, 1982:552), and her characters as 'one-dimensional figures in a feminist cartoon strip' (Kakutani, 1984:C17). Weldon has admitted that she would like to be able to create more believable male characters, but despite extensive experimentation on her part, her narrative point of view remains female. How serious this intention - expressed

in a 1984 interview for the *Contemporary Authors* series - may be is questionable, since in her interview with Haffenden (recorded two years earlier) she admitted that she might well 'have a prejudice against men', and added, 'Let the men liberate themselves' (1985:312-3).

The five chapters of this thesis follow the chronological passage of Fay Weldon's career as novelist. Inevitably - given the absence of a book-length study of the author and a paucity of serious scholarly articles devoted to her fiction - interviews and reviews became important sources. This apparent limitation can, however, be advantageous as conflicting reviews and contrary authorial pronouncements combine to form a portrait of a writer constantly in process, if not always progress. Each chapter begins by sketching its theoretical position(s), already summarized at the beginning of this introduction, or by establishing a cultural context for the novels under discussion. The detailed accounts of Weldon's fiction provided in the first four chapters of the thesis are certainly not intended to offer a 'key' to the texts concerned. Instead, I have been primarily interested in bringing to light (and delighting in) the manifold subversions of which the author is capable. Finally, Chapter Five sets itself the problem, as I mention earlier, of explaining Fay Weldon's undeniable decline in a comparative overview of her fiction. I end by commenting on Weldon's thoroughly postmodern authorial positions and the (provisional) personality that emerges from her unorthodox use of the first person. Asked to describe Fay Weldon, I would be tempted to reply, 'Which one?'. A paradox perhaps, but as the following brief overview of her fiction, biography and the issues they both raise suggests, any study of Fay Weldon needs to maintain a very healthy sense of irony.

\* \* \*

It is significant that Fay Weldon's popularity was established in the early 1970s, at the height of the Women's Liberation movement. *Time* reviewer Melvin Maddocks asserts that 'beside Fay Weldon, all the Germaine Greers, all the Kate Milletts, all

the non-fictionists of Women's Liberation pale into abstract' (1973:56). In his opinion - and I tend to agree - Weldon brought the full import of the movement home to thousands of women through her highly readable style and through her writing of what she described to *Time* as 'the common experience, rooted in children-washing-shopping-cancer-death and all the rest of the messy things women are caught up in' (56).

In her first novel, *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967), adapted from her television play *And the Wife Ran Away*, Weldon suggests a dichotomy between men (who seek self-gratification) and women (who seek self-definition) that has become a major theme in her work. The revenge wreaked by Esther, and her refusal to slim, ultimately bring her husband back to her: it is an emboldening message. The burden of physical appearance, the battle of the sexes, and the wife's revenge are treated again in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), and in both novels Weldon introduces her perennial theme of women as comrades and enemies. This contradiction is explored more fully in *Down Among the Women* (1971) and *Female Friends* (1975), in both of which Weldon traces the relationship of women to men, to each other, to children and to careers over more than one generation. *Praxis* (1978) represents the culmination of Weldon's interest in the connection between biology and destiny, her insistence on the perfidy of men and her concern with the uneasy compact of women. *Praxis*, a woman's odyssey described by A.S. Byatt as 'the single best modern novel about the condition of women' (1979:10), is the thematic counterpart of *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends*. These three unambiguously feminist texts can usefully be read in conjunction with non-fictional works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Of this early period, Weldon remarked to John Haffenden:

... when I started writing the structure of society was weighted very heavily against women and their lot was very obscure. Now it's not so obscure, and there are many who are prepared to take a more political stance than I do.

While the experience of women remained her chief thematic source, in the 1980s Weldon entered a period of highly rewarding narrative experimentation. Her innovations include dialogues which are 'translated' to reveal the subterranean communication taking place, interior monologues heralded by the command 'Listen!', and lists composed by the narrating consciousness. These stylistic interpolations, coupled with the influence of advertising typography on her work - 'if you wish to give something emphasis, you surround it by space' (Haffenden, 1985:320) - draw attention to her texts as discourse and dismiss the illusion of realism. Thus the 1980s mark the onset of a postmodernist phase in Fay Weldon's fiction.

Narrative experimentation has always been Weldon's forté (in the early novels, for instance, she tests the possibilities of the first-person narrative voice, alternating voices and tenses), but in *Puffball* (1980), *The President's Child* (1982), *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), *The Shrapnel Academy* (1986), and *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987), Weldon plays not just with point of view but with genre and convention. Intertextuality, the hallmark of postmodernism, becomes a favourite Weldonian trick. In *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, for example, the neat divisions between author, implied author, narrator, implied reader and reader are cheerfully violated as we are 'reminded' of a party given by real people - the Conrans - and attended by fictional characters. Of another party the narrator reveals 'I was there, with my first husband' (1987:7). A chapter of this novel opens 'Christmas Day, 1978. What were you doing, reader?' (287), thus conflating the normally discrete realms of life and art. Overtones of comedy, farce, revenge, adventure, parable and even thriller are detectable in these frequently reprinted novels. They have an extended readership, since in them Weldon's satirical treatment of chauvinism is expanded to include politics, economics and militarism.

The tight plots of Weldon's 1980s novels enhance our sense of characters being manipulated, particularly as coincidence and fate now feature more prominently. A corollary of this kind of extra-textual intervention is Weldon's increased fascination

with the occult and the supernatural (first seen extensively in *Remember Me*, 1976). Interestingly, Weldon's preoccupation with the supernatural, and specifically, her attribution of occult powers to women protagonists, does not in fact represent a departure from feminist concerns. As Gilbert and Gubar so convincingly demonstrate in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the identification of disobedient women as witches and monsters - the Other - and the exiling of women of power and autonomy to a marginal position, may be subverted to serve a feminist purpose:

From a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible objects - Gorgons, Sirens, Scyllas, serpent-Lamias, Mothers of Death or Goddesses of Night. But from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation, and therefore, like Mary Shelley giving the first-person story of a monster who seemed to his creator to be merely a 'filthy mass that moves and talks,' she presents this figure for the first time from the inside out. Such a radical misreading of patriarchal poetics frees the woman artist to imply her criticism of the literary conventions she has inherited even as it allows her to express her ambiguous relationship to a culture that has not only defined her gender but shaped her mind.

(1979:79)

*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* in particular, but also *The Heart of the Country*, benefit from a reading based on this argument. It is also against this background that we may begin to understand why Weldon's terrible, even at times evil, female heroines never elicit the same criticism as her at times one-dimensional male characters. The subversive spirit that gives the monstrous a voice might seem to be a modern feminist idea. But it has a venerable ancestor in the carnivalesque practice of inversion. Weldon's allusions to Mary Shelley's tale in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, and her overt references to carnival in *The Heart of the Country* suggest that the author is consciously developing her subversive repertoire.

Giving reign to the fantastic, as she does completely in her novella *The Rules of Life* (1987), Weldon confirms herself to be a consummate story-teller. She is able to produce plots in abundance, as *Growing Rich* (1992), *Life Force* (1992) and *Affliction* (1993) testify. But Fay Weldon's most recent novels have only topicality where

trenchant content should be. The view of Starlady Sarah, pseudo-author of *Leader of the Band*, might be said to have become her own: 'Form, style, content - in that order of importance ....Content is last and least' (1988:8). Though in the 1990s, 'Weldon can still be relied upon to give the men a hard time, as Harriet Waugh puts it (1992:34), her privileging of form over content means that she is no longer easily identifiable as a feminist novelist. *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989) and *Darcy's Utopia* (1990) foreground powerful female protagonists but owe more to her reading of *New Scientist* than *Feminist Review*. In fact, Weldon was publicly taken to task in the latter journal for her 'irresponsible' publication of *Sacred Cows* (in the Chatto *CounterBlasts* Series). The author of this attack, Clara Connolly, accuses Weldon of a shallow feminism:

I often felt I was eavesdropping on unguarded expressions of witty irritation she would indulge in at the dinner table with friends.

(1990:115)

Interestingly, this is exactly how Weldon does see her writing. Reviewer Cara Chanteau points out that

Fay Weldon once likened her writing for women's magazines to the cosy chat round the kitchen table, while novels were the equivalent of dinner-party conversation.

(1986:29)

The metaphor of the dinner table conversation is particularly apt,<sup>8</sup> not just as an analogy for how Weldon constructs her fictions, but as a focal image for understanding her position as a postmodern feminist. She is much given, in her novels and stories, to making sweeping generalizations ('The world is full of little towns that people want to leave' [*GR*: 1]), imputing thoughts to her readers ('You might think, indeed, that God has taken a special dislike to Gwyneth' [*FF*: 37]), and offering unsolicited advice ('Cross the road when you see Alsations coming' [*RM*:39]). She sets herself up as the ultimate purveyor of information and knowledge, consequently when she proceeds to get her facts wrong there is a critical outcry (Davies, 1987:11; Johnson, 1987:14; Kossick, 1989:32). In the same way that misinformation at a dinner

party might inspire laughter, Weldon continues to entertain even where she confounds. But this playfulness, I would argue, is not an end in itself: Weldon only appears to offer 'the truth' or 'the universal maxim' when she is in fact deeply aware of how unquestioned beliefs are no more than notions. There may therefore be a philosophical reason why she does not bother to verify her information. Weldon has the postmodernist's mistrust of absolute knowledge, a suspicion which comes across on the printed page as flagrant disregard for 'truth'.

It is important to note the author's awareness of these complex issues. In *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, 'Aunt Fay' supplies a humorous list of unquestioned beliefs which she supposes her 'niece' harbours. They range from 'It is better to be good than bad' to 'The BBC has the best TV service in the world' (1984:24-5). Here we see how bathos and absurdity serve as mechanisms to give the lie to an 'objectively' determined reality. Her generalizations, for example, are so outrageous that they offer a feminist subversion of the very notion of broad definition. If gender generalizations have been at least partly responsible for the subjugation of women, then Weldon's specious generalizations mock and undermine that process. It is in this light that we should view her 'shocking' statement in *Rebecca West*: 'If I generalize about men, tough titty' (1985:92).

Weldon's strategy is to undermine the notion of a dominant logic and thus to disrupt and dislodge all power positions, including her own. I say 'her own', not just because of the powerful omniscience she favours in her fiction, but because the media age in which we are submerged has given a special status to authors' opinions. The resulting proliferation of interviews invites literary critics to let the author have the last word. In Derridean terms, this persistent interviewing of the author represents a search for Truth, for the 'presence' putatively available in speech but not in the printed word. When Fay Weldon uses these interviews as opportunities to differ from remarks she has made previously, she defers constantly the questions 'who is Fay Weldon?', and 'what is her fiction about?', and insists that the game continues.

The issue of conversations with Fay Weldon brings us back to the dinner party: it is Weldon's wit, her habit of half-meant throwaway lines, her talent for repartee that unnerve a feminist critic like Clara Connolly. What Connolly wants from Weldon is rigour and fairness and respect for sociology. In this case she may be justified, since Weldon's *Sacred Cows* is a non-fictional work on a controversial topic: the Rushdie affair. The problem lies partly in the fact that Weldon, as popular author, is consequently afforded an oracular status by the media and may speak on any platform. But more to the point, Weldon's fictionalizing habit is so deeply ingrained, as can be seen in *Rebecca West* and *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, that she cannot or will not adopt the serious discourse of non-fiction. A careful reading of Fay Weldon's oeuvre reveals an essential dichotomy: truth is equated with boredom and fiction with entertainment. 'Fiction is much safer than non-fiction. You can be accused of being boring, but seldom of being wrong' (*LA*, 1984:49). In *The Rules of Life*, the narrator announces 'I have, or had, in my life, no particular appetite for truth' (1987:7). In the story 'Redundant! or The Wife's Revenge', the narrator reminds us of 'the prerogative of the writer - to change the rules as work proceeds', a premise we must accept or 'close the book' (1985:192). Significantly, in *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* Weldon admires in Jane Austen's juvenilia her capricious announcement that 'indeed the recital of any Events (except what I make myself) is uninteresting to me'. Aunt Fay's exclamation: 'You see! The born novelist. She is raising invention above description; what she makes herself is above what the real world has to offer' (1984:52) leaves no doubt about the author's priorities.

The objection raised by Connolly may not, after all, be a problem exclusively related to Fay Weldon's feminism, but to feminism generally as, in all its seriousness, it confronts postmodernism, in all its playfulness. Jane Flax concludes her consideration of the problem in her article 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory' thus:

... there is no force or reality 'outside' our social relations and activity (e.g., history, reason, progress, science, some transcendental essence) that will rescue us from partiality and differences. Our lives and alliances

belong with those who seek to further decenter the world - although we should reserve the right to be suspicious of their motives and visions as well. Feminist theories, like other forms of postmodernism, should encourage us to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity as well as to expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these needs may be.

(1987:642-3)

With Fay Weldon, one is constantly faced with 'ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity' that seem to defeat any serious intent. This applies not only to what she writes, but to what she says (though, as we have seen, Weldon does not make a significant distinction between the acts of speaking and writing). Like non-fictional discourses, the interview sets itself up as more reliable and authoritative than mere dinner party chat. Weldon has been interviewed consistently from 1973 to the present and yet she has never been consistent. One of the main issues she has problematized as a result is her own feminism. While feminism is a process, interviews are not: they have a beginning and a middle and an end, and are in many ways like texts. Thus in addition to the numerous published works cited at the beginning of this study, we have a battery of Fay Weldon interviews to 'read'.

Interviewed by Haffenden in London just before she left for Australia,<sup>9</sup> Weldon agreed that she writes 'literature with intent to reform' and endorsed the suggestion that she had 'a campaign going' (1985:108,112):

I am a feminist and I write novels, and because I believe feminism to be a true view of the world what I write is bound to come out to be feminist. You could advance the view that all good writing is bound to be feminist

....

(313)

Three years later, interviewed by Valerie Grove for ICE Video, her response to the question 'Do you call yourself a feminist writer?' is a more reticent 'Depends on the company'. That she sees the question as problematic is evident in her remark to Haffenden that 'when people ask if you're a feminist ... you immediately say "yes" because there's an implied criticism, and you will therefore not regard it as a criticism' (1985:313). What we see at work here is Weldon's substitution of contrariness for

logic. She responded in a similar way to a similar inquiry in the 1984 *Contemporary Authors* interview. On that occasion she said that the label 'feminist' was

not a label I would ever disown, because it would seem as if I were disowning it for all the wrong reasons. Many feminists wouldn't consider me a feminist at all. Many nonfeminists would think I was. I flicker in and out of the feminist mainstream.

(424)

The disparity among the remarks made in the various interviews may be seen in the light of Weldon's progression from vociferous member of the Women's Liberation Movement to a postmodernist prevaricator who listens to her own words being quoted and then says 'Did I really say that? How interesting. I must have believed it' (*Contemporary Authors*, 1984:425). Ironically, Weldon may come across more consistently in fiction, where 'fortunately ... there are this week's truths and next week's' (Haffenden, 1985:314), than in interviews. The interviews, however, remain our principal source of biographical information.

My decision to include biographical notes needs justification. Carolyn Heilbrun's reflection, in 'Margaret Mead and Woman's Biography', is one I endorse:

Doubtless, we shall take a long time to admit that biographies are fictions necessary to the biographer ... . Apart from all other considerations, the chance involved in what 'facts', documents, memories survive has been far too little credited: we dislike admitting that the results of our scholarship, while rewarding, may be far from conclusive.

(1990:27)

Nevertheless, a special case needs to be made for researching or noting women's biographies. In the first place, the task should be seen as part of the broader feminist project of recovery, of writing 'her story' rather than history. Secondly, biography is necessary not only because women's voices have been silenced, but because it is often (given prevailing domestic arrangements) extremely difficult for women to write or make their mark in any way at all, and this fact must be acknowledged. Mary Gordon's character Anne, in *Men and Angels* (1985), admirably expresses women's fascination with other women's life stories:

Yet one wanted to know, when the women had accomplished something. Whom did they love in relation to their bodies? Whom were they

connected to by blood? Like dogs, she thought, like horses. The truth of the matter was that for a woman to have accomplished something, she had to get out of the way of her own body. This was the trick people wanted to know about. Did she pull it off? As if life were a trick, making doves fly out of a hat, turning an egg into a flower. Stupidly, like the watchers of soap operas, people who were interested in the achievements of women wanted the grossest facts: Whom did they sleep with? Did they have any babies? Were their fathers kind to them, cruel to them? Did they obey or go against their mothers? Infantile questions, yet one felt one had to know. It gave courage, somehow. One wanted to believe that the price was not impossible for those accomplished women, that there were fathers, husbands, babies, beautifully flourishing beside the beautiful work. For there so rarely were. (50)

Fay Weldon herself acknowledges in her ICA interview with Valerie Grove:

An audience can't settle, when a woman is on the platform, until they know her marital status and whether or not she has children.

(n.d.)

\* \* \*

Fay Weldon was born in England on September 22, 1933.<sup>10</sup> The daughter of Frank Thornton, a doctor, and Margaret Birkinshaw, and the granddaughter of the Edwardian writer Edgar Jepson, whom she quotes in *Rebecca West*, Weldon spent the early part of her childhood in New Zealand, where her father worked.<sup>11</sup> At the end of World War II, following her parents' divorce, she returned to England and attended South Hampstead High School. Her mother, a housekeeper and a writer,<sup>12</sup> became the single parent and breadwinner of the new family unit, which now entered a period of 'hardship and deprivation' (*Time*, 1973:56). This all-female household, consisting of mother, grandmother and sister, exerted an enduring influence. The author's comment in a 1982 interview with Monica Cunningham offers a crucial insight into the Weldonian worldview:

I thought the world was composed of women. I always assumed the world was female and I was astonished to discover that on the outside it was assumed to be male.

(in Salzmänn-Brunner, 1988:179)

A scholarship enabled Fay Weldon to attend St Andrews University in Scotland after leaving school. Here, ironically, she failed English examinations, graduating instead with a Master's degree in Economics and Psychology in 1954. At this point biology intervened: she discovered that she was pregnant and left home to find her first job, writing 'propaganda' for the Foreign Office. Interviewed by John Haffenden, she outlined the invidiousness of her position:

Being a young woman with a child to support and no father for it, you lived on what you as a woman could make, which wasn't much.

(1985:311)

In fact, she admitted in her interview with Cunningham that she escaped the tedium of her first job by marrying a man twice her age, a union that, quite predictably, did not last. She went on to work in market research, and even answered problem letters in the *Daily Mirror*. She says in her interview with Valerie Grove that she still gets letters from her readers asking for advice, nor is she averse to offering counsel in her novels: she is indeed a veritable Aunt Fay, and at least one reviewer has complained of 'that auntie-ish finger-wagging at the reader' (Heron, 1987:25). Through a friend, Weldon managed to find employment in the 1950s as a copywriter with Ogilvy and Mather. Here she came up with the slogan 'Go to Work on an Egg', later to be horribly, if appropriately, satirized by Peter Kemp who reviewed *Puffball* under the heading 'Go to work on an Ovum' (1980:254). In a witty moment of self-mockery, Weldon has her character Praxis invent the caption, 'God made her a woman ... love made her a mother - with a little help from electricity!' (218).

The period spent in advertising has had a lasting effect on Weldon's style and typography. Even the appearance of her pages serves her humorous and satirical intentions. Though in her 1988 interview with Valerie Grove she agrees that her paragraphs constitute 'filmic frames', that each one is 'a thought', and that she uses punctuation to take her readers out of the pleasant fiction, obliging them 'to have an opinion', when she first began writing a different imperative was in operation. Her marriage to Ron Weldon, an antiques dealer and trumpeter, produced three more sons.

In a talk given at Morley College in 1985 she commented on the way in which the combination of career and motherhood produced what was to become her characteristic writing style:

My stories have short, sharp paragraphs, like advertising copy, because I had a great deal to say and very little time. I used to get up at 6 am to write before I went to work. I was unusual as I had to work fulltime, on a pittance, while supporting my children. So I couldn't begin writing till I was thirty.

(Kenyon, 1988:112)

Thirty was a significant age for Weldon. In 1963 she went into analysis. She said to Haffenden:

I would probably not have written had I not gained some self-knowledge and decided I was capable of doing it ... . I was thirty, inadequate and depressed and ignorant, and knew it. Analysis was dreadfully painful and very interesting. It was a painful and necessary thing.

(1985:310)

This was also the year in which she met (and immediately went home with) Ron Weldon: their marriage was to last 30 years. The couple were divorced following Ron Weldon's affair with a psychologist-cum-astrologer who had 'deduced from reading in a magazine that the [Weldons] were incompatible' (Sibree, 1995:2). Weldon - who had once cheerfully endorsed both analysis and astrology<sup>13</sup> - went on to write *Affliction* (1993), a bitterly autobiographical novel which denounces astro-therapy. No Fay Weldon title was published in 1994. This would not be an unusual time lapse for most novelists, but is remarkable for the prolific Weldon, and suggests that where analysis had once apparently helped her to write, it has now (briefly) silenced her. Given the fact that she has subsequently remarried, her readers might be forgiven for adopting the perspective of the author's mother who, on Weldon's second (1963) marriage 'saw [her] leaping from frying pan into fire' (Anon, *Fair Lady*, 1987:77).

\* \* \*

Even a brief survey of Fay Weldon's life points to the transmuting of a unique memory into fictional enterprise. The themes of female solidarity, biological and genetic determinism, single parenthood, financial hardship, marital dissension and divorce, as well as the embedded and overt references to advertising and analysis and the undeniable influence of stage-, screen- and copywriting, illustrate how the essentially personal inspires recurrent motifs. One need think only of single parents and deserting fathers in *Remember Me*, *Praxis*, *The President's Child* and in *The Heart of the Country*; communities of women in *Female Friends* and *Down Among the Women*; the second wife syndrome in *Remember Me* and *Darcy's Utopia*; childbirth and child rearing in *Puffball*, *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends*. The influence of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, the television series on which Weldon worked, on *The Shrapnel Academy* is undeniable, and *The Heart of the Country* and *The Fat Woman's Joke* were both television series before they were novels. *Polaris* won the Giles Cooper Award for the best radio play in 1978 before it was adapted and included in the eponymous collection of stories. When asked to look back over the period of her life spent in advertising Weldon has remarked how 'some passages in *Praxis* refer to the general ethos of the time';<sup>14</sup> casual as this may seem, the connection in fact goes much deeper. *Praxis* too, objects to being part of a cigarette campaign, and looks back on the time when 'she gave dinner parties by night and wrote advertisements by day' (49); the ambiguity between author and character is clearly intentional. 'The Year of the Green Pudding' in *Moon over Minneapolis* refers directly to an incident Weldon described to Haffenden, in which she printed a faulty recipe in a women's magazine during the 'Add an Egg' campaign. Thus the content, style and form of her fiction draw heavily on her experiences as daughter, mother, wife and working woman.

Despite the overriding irony that verifiable facts about Fay Weldon are hard to come by ('you mean I tell lies', was her riposte to Valerie Grove when questioned on this score), she may be seen to exemplify an essential feminist tenet: that the personal is political. Yet in prefacing this thesis with a summary of Weldon's life and

achievements, I am disregarding 'Aunt Fay's' stated opinion that she does not think 'the life or personality of writers to be particularly pertinent to their work' (LA:24). Paradoxically, I am also adopting her favoured method. In *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, she complains that

it is not just my novels (legitimate prey, as works of what they care to call the creative imagination) but me they end up wanting to investigate, and it is not a profitable study .... (10)

But Weldon herself conflates autobiography, biography and literary criticism, and confounds genre distinctions even further by adopting a fictional framework. We are offered a parallel between the 'letters' signed 'Aunt Fay' and addressed to a fictional niece, Alice, and Jane Austen's correspondence with her niece, Anna. 'Aunt Fay' writes from Australia, a country Fay Weldon visited again in the early 1980s, and refers to public readings of Weldon's novel *Puffball*. But *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* is dedicated to Fay Weldon's mother, specifically not 'the one in this book ... she is an entirely invented character'.<sup>15</sup> The successful novel *The Wife's Revenge*, written by the fictional Alice, has the same title as a story by Weldon in *Polaris*. The density of this textual interweaving highlights Weldon's fictional practice, with its paradoxical insistence on, and simultaneous undermining of, verifiable truth. *Rebecca West*, for example, is based on biographical research, but in her introduction Weldon announces that she has 'no shame' in 'having simply made a lot up' (20). Indeed she sees this procedure as a virtuous one: 'Better, if the biographer has a glimmer of the single thin consistent thread that runs through a life, to give up fact and take to fiction. It is as honourable a course as any' (20).

Both in *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* and in *Rebecca West*, Weldon herself finds it impossible to consider the writer's work outside the context of the writer's life, nor can she resist pointing out parallels with her own life:

Jane Austen is reputed to have fainted away when she came home from a walk with her sister, Cassandra, and was told by her mother, 'It's all settled. We're moving to Bath.' It was the first, they say, she'd heard of it. (Mind you, as I am fond of saying, they'll say anything!) She was 25; she had lived all her life in the Vicarage at Steventon: her father, without

notifying anyone, had decided to retire, and thought that Bath was as pleasant a place as any to go. *None of us fainted the day my father came home and told my mother, my sister and myself that he was leaving us that day to live for ever with his sweetheart, whose existence he'd never hinted at before.*

(LA:29, italics mine)

In *Rebecca West*, too, Weldon sees a connection between herself and that writer:

At this particular moment I suspect you need someone, anyone, to say, 'It is all going to be all right.' I seem as well fitted as anyone to say it, being more than old enough in 1985 to be your 1914 mother; and your future and the world's to date lying mapped out before me, and my own early background and experience, though placed later in time, being not dissimilar to yours.

(RW: 27)

Several issues which have an important bearing on Fay Weldon's fictional practice arise from these two quotations. Her postmodernist consciousness of intertextuality, her disruption of seamless narrative through changes in point of view or register, her insistence on conversing with the reader, and her concomitant preference for the pronoun 'I', are all in evidence. Significantly, the impulse behind Weldon's insertion of herself into the text is a feminist one. The sense of solidarity which prompts her in these two instances underpins the Woman's Movement as a whole. Using this very argument, Fay Weldon has accounted for the popularity of 'any seminar on Women and Writing, or Women Writers, or the New Female Culture' and 'readings by writers, and in particular women writers':

At last, it seems, there is some connection between Life and Art, the parts do add up to more than the whole! We always thought it! We discover - lo! - we are not alone in the oddity of our beliefs.

(LA: 60)

The conviction that 'we are not alone' informs almost every Weldonian narrative, where the pronouns 'you' and 'we' engage the reader in a dialogue, since, according to Weldon's poetics, 'writing must be in some way a shared experience between reader and writer' (LA: 80). Her predilection for first-person narrators and her choice of an

epistolary model for both her works of biographical criticism point to this as the essential theoretical underpinning of Weldon's fiction.

*Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* represents the writer's literary manifesto. Here she posits the view that good literature 'threatens', and 'suggests the reader should reflect, change'. Writing, she believes, has a social purpose: 'Enlighten people, and you enlighten society', she states. This sounds very formal and constructive, but we should not forget the distinction Weldon draws between 'fiction for moral instruction' and fiction 'as a mirror held up to reality' (LA:110). It is the couching of that moral instruction in forms that deny, play with, alter and confound 'reality' that will be traced in this study. Her subversiveness, her penchant for the bizarre, her irrepressible sense of humour, may lead us to issue a counter claim to her repeated refrain. 'They'll say anything', she complains of the world and its arbitrariness: anyone who has read a Fay Weldon novel knows perfectly well that in fact, *she'll* say anything.

## Endnotes

1. The adjective 'subversive' may trip lightly off a literary scholar's tongue, but outside the sheltered realm of academe it can be a frightening appellation with very real consequences for an author. Weldon remembers:  
My first novels were gratifying to me, surprising to some, shocking to many. When I began [to publish] people would walk out of rooms, judging my books as indecent and subversive.  
(Kenyon, 1989:198)
2. The fact remains, of course, that there is considerable common ground among women writers. In her brief essay, 'A Woman Writer', Margaret Drabble summarizes what the similarity might consist in:  
The large amount of fiction written by women in the last decade, since the highly significant publication of Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, bears witness that a lot of women started to worry about the same things at the same time, and turned to fiction to express their anxieties not only because, traditionally, and despite the spread of education, they still had nowhere else to turn, but also because fiction is ideally suited to such themes. ... There is no point in sneering at women writers for writing of problems of sexual behaviour, of maternity, of gynaecology - those who feel the need to do it are actively engaged in creating a new pattern, a new blueprint.  
(1983:159)
3. Advance notice of titles includes a novel - *A House Divided* (2 April 1995) - and an as yet unnamed collection of short stories, scheduled to appear in December of the same year. Advance notification of an untitled novel for 1996 has also been issued (*Books in Print*, 1985). Postscript: *Splitting* has just appeared, and may be the novel referred to as *A House Divided*.
4. 'Prolific is not a respectable thing for any writer to be. I could reply by saying that others read too slowly, not that I write too fast', was Weldon's typically flippant response to a question by Kenyon (1989:204).
5. For a more complete list of Weldon's extensive publications, see the select bibliography (199).

6. In her interview with Olga Kenyon, Weldon says:  
 I don't think one can always ignore everything that departments of literature say. Yet, simply because novels are so long and require one's own animation, one cannot listen too much. I remain slightly mystified by what critics say the novel ought to be. It seems to me that a novel is anything you can persuade a publisher to print - and readers to read.  
 (1989:196)
7. In researching *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, Weldon doubtless discovered a sense of kinship with that eighteenth century author who wrote amid a busy family parlour.
8. I was delighted to read, in one of the first reviews of *Splitting*, Weldon described as 'a first-rate after-dinner novelist' (Hughes-Hallett, 1995:7).
9. To complete the filmscript of Stead's novel, *For Love Alone*, in 1982.
10. My biographical sources include Fay Weldon's interviews with *Time* (1973), *Contemporary Authors* (1984), John Haffenden (1985), Valerie Grove (ICA video, n.d) and Olga Kenyon (1989). In addition, Salzmann-Brunner (1988) and Kenyon (1988) incorporate factual information in their books on contemporary women novelists. Newspaper articles that have proved helpful are Melvyn Bragg's 'It's been tremendous luck being a woman for these last 25 years' (1984) an anonymous, untitled *Fair Lady* background piece (1987) and 'A Sting in the Tail of the She-Devil' by Bron Sibree (1995). Weldon's exact date of birth, however, remains somewhat uncertain: a date of 1932 is given in Flora Alexander's *Contemporary Women Novelists* (1989:103).
11. In the National Art Gallery, New Zealand, there is a charming 1938 portrait by Rita Angus entitled 'Fay and Jane Birkenshaw'. The young Fay - blonde, apple-cheeked and deceptively innocent in appearance - could be the heroine of *Lady Noggs Peeress*, one of her grandfather's books for children. Are subversive women in Weldon's genes? Lady Noggs's antics certainly cast her as a miniature she-devil.
12. According to an anonymous *Fair Lady* article, Fay Weldon's mother wrote under the nom-de-plume Pearl Bellairs (1987:76).
13. Her qualified approval of psychoanalysis is evident in the quotation from Haffenden's interview. Regarding astrology, *Fair Lady* quotes Weldon as saying 'it is good to be Virgo-Libra ... it gives you a rigorous nature in some respects, and a rather vague one in others' (1987: 76).

14. The letter (dated 15 August 1991) which I received from Fay Weldon reads:

Briefly, I worked during the Sixties in various advertising agencies, mainly Ogilvy and Mather, where I was copywriter on the egg account (Go To Work On An Egg), and milk (Drink a Pint a Milka Day); refused to do cigarette advertising and occasionally found some relief working on the IBM account. Some passages in *Praxis* refer to the general ethos of the time. I couldn't do it now. Nevertheless communication skills are communication skills and I learnt a great deal about them in advertising. It is just what you write about and why you write that elevates the whole thing from ignoble to noble. And the words 'Creative Department' over the mantel were not a total misnomer.

15. The inscription reads:

To my mother (who is not, I may say, the one in this book, this epistolary novel; *she* is an entirely invented character, along with Alice, Enid and so forth) to whom I owe such morality and wisdom as I have.

## Chapter One

*The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967)

*Down Among the Women* (1971)

*Female Friends* (1975)

Female bodies lie strewn across the battle-field, of course they do, gaunt dead arms uplifting towards the sky. It was an exhilarating battle; don't think it wasn't.

(FF:162)

'You amaze me,' says Byzantia. 'Fancy seeing success in terms of men. How trivial, with the world in the state it's in.'

'Merely as a symbol of success,' pleads Scarlet, 'I don't mean to offer it as the cause.'

'A symptom more like,' says Byzantia, 'of a fearful disease from which you all suffered. One of you even died on the way. I think the mortality rate is too high.'

(DAW:233)

Despite her disclaimer in 'Me and My Shadows' that she 'chose [her] lifestyle a long time ago, before the Women's Movement, or women's consciousness was talked about' (Wandor,1983:164), it is impossible to offer an account of Fay Weldon's

fiction in the late 1960s and early 70s without setting it in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement. In fact, in the same 'interview'<sup>1</sup> she goes on to admit that in retrospect it has been possible to see that what she was writing about could actually 'be organized into an ideology, a movement' (Wandor:164).

Looking back on the 'swinging sixties', when Weldon embarked on her literary career - an era 'when England, as it were, discovered that God was dead, and that sex and youth was [sic] lovely, and age and experience sad, and that images mattered more than reality' (FF:162) - one major irony emerges. In those decades of unprecedented sexual freedom, a new wave of feminists<sup>2</sup> exposed the way in which predetermined sex roles confined and constrained women. Significantly, Weldon has pointed out that she did not need the Women's Movement in order to introduce her to feminism. Her explanatory comment, 'I was an unmarried mother in the 1950s and that was a salutary experience' (Wandor:163), not only suggests, in her case at least, a direct correlation between permissiveness and consciousness-raising, it also allows us to make a fundamental connection between her literary impetus and that of Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer.

Kathleen Dehler<sup>3</sup> has established that a common strain - confession - runs through early sociological studies such as *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Female Eunuch* as well as through certain problematic fictionalized autobiographies of the 1970s. Like Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan, Fay Weldon's early work draws on personal experience that leads in turn to a revolutionary ideological outlook and a concomitant desire to change the lives of other women. The import of Weldon's 1973 remark that her aim is to recondition women so that they no longer 'believe that if they don't get married it's a dreadful mortal sin' (Maddocks, 1973:56) resembles Greer's announcement that for a woman, 'Romance had been the one adventure open to her and now it is over. Marriage is the end of the story' (1970:186). As we shall see, in her refusal to write romance, Weldon makes marriage the beginning of the story, a point to be worked away from and not towards.

In a talk given at Morley College, Weldon describes how she came to write:

I was motivated by indignation; there was an enormous amount to be said because life for women was unjust. That feeling started me writing.

(Kenyon, 1988:104)

The injustices documented by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1969), Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Rosalind Miles in *The Fiction of Sex* (1974), correspond with Fay Weldon's themes in *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967), *Down Among the Women* (1971) and *Female Friends* (1975). The seminal texts by Millett, Friedan, Greer and Miles, which are all heavily indebted to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (trans. 1953), investigate the bases of patriarchy and women's oppression. They expose the stereotyping of women which they claim is a cultural weapon; they identify motherhood and marriage as institutions of female imprisonment and they emphasise the need for sisterhood and solidarity.

Weldon's disadvantaged background turned out to be an advantage: her early experience of poverty - as a child in a household without a male breadwinner, and as a young unmarried mother - alerted her to the fundamental basis of oppression, namely economic dependency. Gwyneth in *Female Friends*, for example, is enslaved not only by her appallingly low wages (evinced an ironic pride that no one else would work for that amount), but by her foolish adoration of the very man who employs her. Millett offers the following insight into this type of feudal relationship:

... it is important to understand that as with any group whose existence is parasitic to its rulers, women are a dependency class who live on surplus. And their marginal life frequently renders them conservative, for like all persons in their situation (slaves are a classic example here) they identify their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them.

(1969:38)

As an adjunct of economic dependency, Weldon charts emotional dependency and the generalized insecurity it brings. Free to work in the world at large while their women remain at home, Weldon's men pursue extra-marital affairs with impunity. But if the women are at home, who participates in these illicit relationships? The feminine stereotype is in fact split in two, as Weldon knows, and this split is designed to divide women against one another. Millett explains the benefit to men:

One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife. ...Through the multiple advantages of the double standard, the male participates in both worlds, empowered by his superior social and economic resources to play the estranged women against each other as rivals.

(1969:38)

Weldon shows this rivalry in operation in the antagonism between Helen, the slim, promiscuous, self-serving mother of Marjorie in *Female Friends*, and Esther, Grace's heavy, domesticated and self-sacrificing mother to whom the free-wheeling Helen has entrusted her daughter. Her treatment of the theme culminates in Ruth's systematic revenge upon Mary Fisher in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983).

Throughout her fiction, however, Weldon refuses to come down against women who relinquish maternal responsibility. The Women's Movement which provides the context for Weldon's early fiction, sought liberation from domesticity. Successive ages had both enshrined motherhood as an ideal (something to be aspired to) and defined it as a female instinct (to be naturally possessed).<sup>4</sup> Weldon treats motherhood neither as an ideal nor as an instinct. Like Adrienne Rich, she distinguishes between the socially imposed institution of motherhood and the potential of women to be mothers. As an institution, motherhood 'has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them' and has consequently 'ghettoized and degraded female potentialities' (Rich, 1976:13).

The extent to which women are reduced to their lowest common denominator of physical attributes is Weldon's constant concern in the novels discussed in this chapter. Later, in *Rebecca West* (1985), she draws on the biography of a great woman writer to prove her point. The relationship between two acknowledged writers - two equally sparkling intellects - is reduced by pregnancy and childbirth to the old stereotype of the powerful, brilliant male condescending to the submissive, adoring female. Weldon imaginatively recreates a scene in which H.G.Wells holds forth about current affairs while Rebecca West lies recumbent in her confinement (an apt enough term). His fatuous conclusion, 'Rebecca, in the last few days, while you have been lying here comfortable and cosy, my poor brain has been whirling and gasping! I am in a terrible state' (90), is demonstrably false, since Weldon has taken care to introduce us first to Rebecca West's internal agony. The male=culture/female=nature divide, Weldon thus asserts, is likely to rear its head whatever the mental capacity of the woman.

The idea that motherhood does not come naturally or without regret recurs in Weldon's fiction as in her personal pronouncements. In her ICA interview with Valerie Grove, she claims that is 'impossible not to be ambivalent about your children - the having of them', and with her characteristic gift for catching her listeners off guard, goes on to state that if she hadn't had children she 'might still think [she] was a nice person'. On the other hand, in her interview with John Haffenden she stresses motherhood's potential: 'Men on the whole don't change. Women change because they have children' (1985:314). Far from being an integral part of a woman's nature, Weldon sees motherhood as requiring an accommodation of personality.

The myth of motherhood is exposed in *Female Friends*, where Grace says an abortion is 'like having a tooth out' (152) and where Helen, when she deigns to visit her daughter in the country, keeps the engine of the car running. Several other novels of this period call maternal instinct into question. Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962) opens with a scene in which a psychiatrist asks the

prolifically fertile heroine, 'Do you think it would be wrong not to like children?', and she replies with a hesitant 'I don't know. Yes. Yes, I think so' (12). The question, so directly posed, effectively places this previously uncontentious issue in the realm of public debate. In *The Edible Woman* (1969) by Margaret Atwood, the heroine's friend Clara, both pregnant and breastfeeding, grimly warns Marion: 'Never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct' (33). When a talented academic falls pregnant in Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965), she feels 'trapped in a human limit for the first time in [her] life' (66), and admits that she has not so much decided to have the baby as 'failed to decide not to have it' (45).

Margaret Atwood points out in her ICA interview (1991) that today no contemporary author can refer to an act of sexual intercourse between two characters without accounting in some way for the risk of AIDS. Similarly, in the 1960s and 1970s, contraceptive method or the lack thereof had to be treated authorially. Not surprising, then, that the virgin made pregnant on her initiation into the mysteries of sex is a motif running through several novels published in those decades. This is the fate of Scarlet in *Down Among the Women*, of Rosamund in *The Millstone*, and of Jane in Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960). These novels have in common a protagonist made pregnant by a man who is ignorant of the fact and whose relationship with the girl ends with the act of impregnation. The result is a situation which enables the author to explore the social stigma of unmarried motherhood, the economics of women's lives, their real and spiritual search for accommodation,<sup>5</sup> and the temptation to abort.<sup>6</sup>

But unlike Banks and Drabble, Weldon does not allow Scarlet to suffer in isolation: she is, after all, down among the women. This brings us to another topic addressed by the Women's Movement and Fay Weldon alike - the troubled question of sisterhood. Both *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends* highlight the mother/daughter relationship in their retrospective assessment of consciousness-raising among peers. Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), explains that 'in the 1970s, the prototypical feminist voice was, to a large degree, the

voice of the daughter attempting to separate from an overly connected or rejecting mother, in order to bond with her sisters in a relationship of mutual nurturance and support among equals' (164). Though Fay Weldon both inside and outside her fictional works expresses a sense of solidarity with other women,<sup>7</sup> she is highly conscious of how fraught with bitter antagonisms the relationship between women really is. Weldon offers a complex resolution of the problem in her novels: while the female characters themselves are bitterly jealous or mistrustful of one another, the narrator overrides their divisions through devices such as the refrain ('Down among the women. What a place to be!' and 'Marjorie, Grace and me'). Paulina Palmer, in one of the best accounts of Weldon's fiction to date, argues that 'Weldon's use of the pronoun "we", moreover, has the effect of mischievously undermining the female reader's pretensions to superiority' (1989:150).

Patriarchy, oppression, stereotype, myth and sisterhood: the catchwords of the Women's Movement act as an index to Weldon's concerns in the texts to be discussed in this chapter. Before going on to examine *The Fat Woman's Joke*, *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends* in more depth, however, I want to map out the thematic territory explored by Weldon in the 1970s, using the stories now collected in *Watching Me, Watching You* (1981) and *Polaris and Other Stories* (1985).

\* \* \*

'Polaris' (1978) is, superficially, the tale of a naval officer's new wife coping with pregnancy, unpaid bills, an incorrigible canine, a dubious female 'friend' and a predatory male, while her husband is called away on a three-month tour of duty on the submarine Polaris. Weldon refrains from any overt reference to the significance of this vessel's name, playfully drawing attention away from it in the first sentence by announcing that 'the dog was called Thompson, a name without significance' (7); and this is where the subtlety and success of the story lies.

'Polaris' is, in fact, a story of the polarisation of the sexes. The narrative switches at pertinent moments from events on land to those at sea. The effect is a witty highlighting of the discrepancy between the lives of the men, members of an 'attack team', and those of the women who stay behind. While the doughty husbands have it in their power to 'finish off the world' (29), and are 'protecting British women and children' (30), the wives remain ashore, as Meg does, 'to love my husband, and walk my dog, and get on with my life' (35). The underlying irony of the story is, of course, that the supposed crack defence team (ensconced in the phallic submarine), spends its time indulging in a series of gourmet meals which include home-made ravioli, *tarte aux poires* and 'chicken à l'aile - chicken stuffed with twenty heads of garlic, and simmered in stock' (55). Briefly interrupted in their gormandizing by an announcement that Russian submarines are in the vicinity, Timmy (the Navigator), Jim (the First Officer) and the captain go up on the bridge and watch the lights on the radar screen without enthusiasm, still holding their plates: 'I wonder if they've discovered food' (24), ponders the Captain, in a parody of Cold War jealousies. Back at the Base, the wives Meg and Zelda dine on ham salad and baked potatoes and contemplate the power wielded by their husbands, 'if the Routine comes through from Base, "blow up Moscow, or Hanoi, or Peking", that's what they'll do' (30), Zelda explains to Meg, the new arrival.

Meg has already begun to doubt the authenticity of the heroic image, however. Watching her husband put on his pistol harness and navy woollen jersey, she realizes that 'Timmy looked like one of his nephew's Action Men, the one with the beard' (11). She quickly reasserts his stature, elevating his appearance from a toy to something 'one might see on a monument to the dead, at the entrance to a War Graves Cemetery' (11). The myth of male bravery and nobility is preserved not only through the wilful connivance of the wives, but through a shroud of secrecy symbolized in the severing of telephone links.

Weldon parodies the male bond, ostensibly based on a mutual desire to defend home and hearth, by relocating it in shared self-interest. When the captain

discovers that dinner is *boeuf au poivre*, but there is only white wine on board, a mock-heroic scene ensues:

'Desperate times, desperate measures!' said the captain, opening one of the canisters of white wine. Then he pricked his finger with a needle and let a drop or two of blood fall inside. 'Here's to universal brotherhood!' he said. 'And to all our faults!' The blood barely discoloured the wine so he added some drops of cochineal as well. 'We'll leave it a rosé,' he said. 'Compromise, that's the thing.'

(50)

'Universal brotherhood' thus represents a firm commitment to self-serving, and is far less problematic than universal sisterhood. At this point, the narrative 'cuts' immediately to the isolated cottage where Meg is trapped by Timmy's locum, his dog Thompson. In an ironic twist to the tale of universal brotherhood, the relationship of Meg and Timmy improves after the death of 'man's best friend', and once the ghost of Thompson has interceded on Meg's behalf. While the dog is left to guard her, she is prevented from almost any form of social intercourse. Although Zelda (once Timmy's mistress) is apparently friendly and comforting, she actually abets the male enterprise by admonishing Meg to think of her husband, not herself, and by introducing her to the philanderer, Tony.

Because she is in love with the mythic 'man within' Timmy, and not 'the bouncy, grinning little boy' (28), Meg is antagonistic to the chant 'Take the toys from the boys' (28) of the Peace women who protest at the Base. She needs to cling to the fantasy of Timmy as noble defender, as she does to the notion that there is in any case no real nuclear threat to the world. She resents the Peace women for threatening these two contradictory illusions, for by acknowledging the existence of forces of darkness, 'they were bringing Armageddon nearer, not keeping it away' (33).

In Meg, Weldon isolates the self-engendered female trap: even while Meg performs a 'masculine' act (riding alone on a bicycle at night down to the Base, making her way through a militant group), she adheres to the notion of her own passive 'femininity' (she has brought a bag containing a dress and high-heeled shoes

to change into). Meg is an accomplice in her own oppression; spurred on by her conviction that sisterhood will lead to Armageddon, she is ignorant of the fact that 'down among the men' is a much better place to be.

Ignorance becomes the chief method by which women are kept in their place. Timmy extends official secrecy to include his own financial affairs, so that Meg is left to discover for herself that his monthly salary (on which she must live) is bespoken and his VISA card has been withdrawn 'for non-payment of dues' (35). Significantly, the feminization of poverty is a recurrent theme in Weldon's fiction, and the economic tyranny exerted by men finds expression in the parsimony of male characters such as Patrick Bates or Oliver in *Female Friends*. In the story 'Man With No Eyes' (1977), the theme receives a rather more heavy-handed treatment as a dominant husband torments his wife in a game of Monopoly which she loses almost immediately. A more satisfying later story is 'Christmas Lists' (1983), where a relationship is saved when retrenchment leads to a changed domestic economy.

'Polaris', then, offers a perfect image of the way in which patriarchy operates. The contrast between the cosy submarine on its apparently important and dangerous mission, which is in fact a culinary cruise, and the cold North Sea shores where women suffer hardship and deprivation, but are too divided to be of real comfort to one another, is a salutary paradigm of the damaging effects of polarity.

A story which underlines with chilling emphasis the need for female solidarity is 'Alopecia' (1976) in *Watching Me, Watching You*. As in *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends*, the relationship of a group of women is traced over a period of several years. The refusal of all but one of her friends to recognize that Erica is a battered wife (he does not tear her hair out, they claim, she has alopecia) is given a macabre twist when her staunchest opponent, Maureen, marries the abusive man. Alison, a kindly soul who has lost her own husband (ironically 'a rather straight and respectable actor who believed in women's rights' [48]) as a result of taking the stricken Erica in a second time, later catches sight of a battered and balding Maureen:

I'm afraid Maureen has alopecia, on top of everything else,' she says to anyone who happens to enquire after that sad, forgotten figure, who once had everything - except, perhaps, a sense of sisterhood.

(59)

The betrayal of women by other women - a theme common to *The Fat Woman's Joke*, *Down Among the Women*, and *Female Friends* - is a consequence of a female tendency to derive a sense of identity from relationships with men rather than with one's own sex. 'In *The Great War*', published in *Polaris and Other Stories*, identifies the 1950s as the time 'when women were at war with women' (129). This is precisely the era in which Betty Friedan locates the marriage boom, when in America 60% of women 'dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar' (1963:14). 'In *The Great War*' exposes the economics of sexuality in an era when 'men gave women money, and women gave men life' (137). In this story, about a girl who despises her mother for losing her father to a younger woman, and who subsequently steals an English professor from *his* wife, Weldon portrays the 'Great War' between women as a desperate battle for material resources: 'Victory meant a soft bed and an easy life: defeat meant loneliness and the humiliation of the spinster' (129). Whereas in more propitious times, a woman like Helen 'would have gone into battle for some unmarried professional' (130), the circumstances of World War II reduce her to laying claim 'to Arthur, Patty's husband, a railway engineer in the north of England' (130). Later, Enid - Arthur and Patty's daughter - goes to university, choosing English Literature 'as the subject least likely to put men off' (132).

Through her sexual submissiveness, Enid makes the forty-eight-year-old Walter feel virile and potent once more ('there was, he felt, something indecent about Rosanne's sexual prowess: something disagreeably insatiable in her desires, it made Walter, from time to humiliating time, impotent' [134]). She restores to Walter the myths of femininity and motherhood (including cake-baking and darning) that he has lost by having 'a genius at languages' (135) as a wife. Until this point, it seems that the chief issue is the battle between women for men. But when Edith

falls pregnant and aims for the 'great prizes' - 'the best mother, the prettiest child, the whitest white' (140) - we realize that Walter has merely been the lucky beneficiary of the contest for most convincing stereotype. He has nothing further to gain here, since 'Walter Walther took the view, common in the Great War, that the begetting of children was something to do with the one-upmanship of woman against woman, and very little to do with the man' (139).

Though Weldon, in her ICA interview, quotes Margaret Drabble, 'Men have babies too', the men in her novels tend to be outwardly creative while profoundly uninterested, if not in procreation, then in its end results. Children, in her fiction, have an important narrative function. The turning point of 'In the Great War', for example, is reached when the pregnant Edith, still managing, at half past eight sharp, to serve up 'his boiled egg and toast soldiers and freshly milled coffee' (140), is saddled with Rosanne's twins, Barbara and Bernadette. There is an abrupt return to Sugar Puffs and slopped milk; Walter spends more time away from home and secretly visits his ex-wife. Enid, who had been 'so quiet and elegant and self-controlled through her pregnancy' (142), screams and weeps through her labour. It is only possible to maintain the feminine mystique, as Helen does in *Female Friends*, by abandoning one's offspring. Children undermine or destroy the myths of femininity and perfect motherhood. Weldon uses them as a moral tool for cutting the overbearing or unbearable down to size. Relinquishing the myths of femininity and motherhood is akin to a laying down of arms in terms of this story's central metaphor. Weldon's narrator displays a cheeky optimism:

Later still she was to become something of a propagandist in the new cold war against men; she wore jeans and a donkey jacket and walked round linked arm-in-arm with women. But that was, perhaps, hardly surprising, so treacherous had the old male allies turned out to be. All the same, yesterday's enemy, tomorrow's friend! Who is to say what will happen next? (143)

By insisting on a precise historical demarcation for this 'war', Weldon refuses to give credence to the idea that the condition of women cannot be altered. This is a

much bolder statement of generational politics than we earlier find voiced in *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends*.

The comment made in 'In the Great War', that 'in fact, the Second World Male War, from 1939 to 1945, which men had waged among themselves in the name of Democracy, Freedom, Racial Supremacy and so forth, to the great detriment of women and children everywhere, had sharpened the savagery of the Female War' (130), could apply equally to *Female Friends*, which also makes this crucial connection between female rivalry over men and the impoverished war years. It is important to read Weldon's third novel in conjunction with this much later story which is, in a thematic sense, its sequel. Despite reviewing *Female Friends* favourably in *The Washington Post*, Penelope Mortimer advises Fay Weldon that the ending of the novel is 'a cheat' (1974:2). The ending of 'In the Great War' is, interestingly, much more pointed. Far from abandoning the family home and her adopted children, Enid assumes command. She goes back to college and takes a degree, and 'was later to earn a good living as a research scientist' (143). It is fascinating to see how distance in time enables Weldon to re-envision her endings, a corroboration of the view that narrative both challenges and reflects ideology.<sup>8</sup>

In the stories collected in *Watching Me, Watching You* and *Polaris and Other Stories*, Weldon's thematic terrain is laid open. Her critique of men as the image creators of women is most pungent in a story such as 'Holy Stones' (1979). Here a man finds a woman who matches his checklist of requirements (eroticism, wealth, fame, youth, the ability to play sport without sweating, tan without burning, attract other men), only to discover that he has left out one item: she should worship no gods (presumably other than himself). In 'Christmas Tree', a witty parallel is drawn between boiling the roots of Christmas trees and confining oneself within marriage. The economic basis of oppression emerges not only in the stories discussed above, but in 'Breakages' (1978); and the ways of dealing with that oppression range from secret departure, as in 'Angel, all Innocence' (1977), to paralysis, as in 'Delights of France' (1984), to the sisterhood of 'In the Great War'.

Weldon's impulse is to wreak through her narratives a retributive justice for inequities that have been entrenched in relationships between the sexes. In her ICA interview with Valerie Grove, she rejects the idea that novels 'ought to be fair like a BBC programme'. Several complaints have been lodged against the unfairness of her treatment of men; significantly these complaints come most often from male reviewers uncomfortable at (or secretly outraged by) her perceived attacks on their sex.<sup>9</sup> There is consequently an air of retaliation in what they write:

I have nothing against women novelists ... [but] I prefer novels about the human predicament to ones exclusively about the female one. ... That Miss Weldon makes her point with force, elegance and precision cannot be denied; but nor, alas, can it be denied that many a male chauvinist pig may eventually wish to avert his eyes from this perpetual waving of a sanitary towel as a bloodstained standard on the barricades between the sexes... .

(King, 1980:22)

The heroine of her first novel - *The Fat Woman's Joke* - was a middle-aged woman named Esther who had traded in her philandering husband for the dubious satisfactions of the single life, and most of Miss Weldon's subsequent heroines have shared both Esther's plight and her talent for gaining weight and complaining. ... [In *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*] the men are all variations on this year's model of The Male Chauvinist Pig ... .

(Kakutani, 1984:17)

The real questions - 'Why isn't there a universal "human predicament"?' and 'Why do women have "a talent for complaining"?' - are not asked. The connection between complaint and weight gain is all-important, as Weldon demonstrates in *The Fat Woman's Joke*. Both 'faults' point to a refusal to be confined. When male critics fall into the trap of accusing Fay Weldon of being a nag, this is because they have failed to realize that 'women's discontent...is not the neurotic lament of the maladjusted, but a response to a social structure in which women are systematically dominated, exploited and oppressed' (Hartmann in Palmer, 1989:43).

Weldon's rejection of fairness in favour of retribution is evident both in *The Fat Woman's Joke* and 'Redundant! Or The Wife's Revenge', published in *Polaris and Other Stories* (1985) nearly twenty years later. *The Fat Woman's Joke* represents Weldon's first attempt to examine the imbalance inherent in the traditional marital relationship, and to seek, if not an answer, at least a retort, to this imbalance. Esther's departure from the family home and her solitary, compulsive eating of convenience foods are as much a rejection of a female body stereotype as a figurative weighing down of the scales in her favour.

'Food demarcates power relationships': this is the argument expressed by Mervyn Nicholson in his article 'Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others' (1987:38). Though Nicholson does not use Weldon's novel as an example, his remarks are pertinent. Looking at the food chain he concludes that 'those who are weak are eaten by those who are strong', and that therefore, 'metaphorically, if you are weak, you are edible; if you are edible, you are weak' (39). *The Fat Woman's Joke*, originally a television play for Granada (1966), contains the germ of this idea but does not develop it. The novel is both very short and very ambitious, attempting to deal with body stereotype ('I suppose you really do believe that your happiness is consequent upon your size?' [10]), domestic pettiness ('All the way home in his taxi that evening he brooded about Esther's malice in plotting to cook his omelet in butter the night before' [50-51]), domestic rebellion ('Running a house is not a sensible occupation for a grown woman' [54]), and the failure of marriage to compensate women. Esther's voice, lecturing Phyllis on these topics, is a polemical one: we are told rather than shown the thematic content of the novel.

In this sense, *The Fat Woman's Joke* is not as successful as Margaret Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), which culminates in a stunning exposé of the relationship of food to power. Marion bakes and ices a cake in the shape of a woman and proffers it to her fiancé Peter:

'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you,' she said. 'You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all

along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork,' she added somewhat prosaically. (271)

Later, in *Lady Oracle* (1976), Atwood deals separately with the connection between body image and female identity, using a first-person narrator who agrees to lose weight only when it is stipulated in her aunt's will. Joan escapes various unpleasant situations by simply lying about herself, thus creating an hilarious feminist comedy which includes the staging of her own death.

The problem with Weldon's debut novel, on the other hand, is that if the fat woman has a joke, she doesn't see it herself: 'And what a victory, over what' (142), she responds grumpily to Phyllis's bright effusions when Alan comes to take her home. Perhaps Weldon was aware of the unsatisfactory nature of this ending when she wrote 'Redundant! or The Wife's Revenge'. In the reconstituted story, which now features a daughter instead of a son ('that's the prerogative of the writer' [192]), the battle-lines are laid down afresh. Ours not to reason why (or how) Esther is, of a sudden, 'lean and freckly and passionate, for all the world like Katherine Hepburn in Venice in *Summer Madness*' (197): the narrator has an old score to settle. Alan is now cast as the powerless partner. His affair with his daughter's girlfriend ends in deflation when she advises him to 'buy a manual' (217). Then, made redundant (with all the wry connotations of the word included), he tries to hide the truth from his wife until one day he returns home early to confess, only to find Esther *in flagrante delicto* with her lover. To drive home his ignominy and the reversal of roles, Alan has a face-lift as part of his redeployment course for redundant executives: while he is lying helplessly bandaged, his wife visits him, lover in tow. Once again, husband and wife are reconciled; only this time, the fat woman has her joke. Instead of a new egalitarianism, the story relishes the sweet satisfaction of tables turned. Esther's new job - writing food captions - shows the extent to which she has gained control over the things which once controlled her; she even pre-empts the loss of her lover by instigating a reconciliation with Alan. Weldon's rewriting of her 1967 novel, and especially the replacement of 'joke' with 'revenge', are

indicative of her deployment of a subversive narrative technique which portrays unfairness as fair.

\* \* \*

Retribution remains one of the most important functions of plot in Fay Weldon's fiction, but it is particularly evident in the early works. In *Down Among the Women* (1971), for example, there is a poignantly funny scene in which the pregnant Scarlet arrives at the flat where her father and his equally pregnant new wife, Susan, reside. Scarlet is the first to go into labour, and Susan's doctor, the aptly named Mr Justice arrives. The Weldonian justice meted out here includes the displacement of the interloper (Susan, despite her elaborate preparations for a home birth, is forced to go into hospital, where all manner of misfortunes occur); the re-invoking of paternal responsibility (Kim, whose relationship with Wanda ended when Scarlet was five, must now nurture both daughter and granddaughter); and the reinstatement of the first wife's power (as grandmother, Wanda is free to command the activities in Kim's flat). This justice is, ironically, made possible through the very female biology that supposedly gives men like Kim the upper hand. In fact, the unpredictable and inconsistent nature of that biology makes it the perfect weapon.

*Down Among the Women* traces the destinies of Wanda, Scarlet, Audrey, Sylvia, Jocelyn, Helen and Byzantia - three generations of women - in a narrative spanning twenty years. It is in many ways representative of what Ellen Morgan has described as the 'neo-feminist novel' (1978:272). Such novels are 'interested in the "common" woman, believing that a valid history is the story of culture and not simply of power' (274); writers of such novels tell the stories 'of the women in their own families. They are recreating the lives of their grandmothers, their mothers and themselves' (275); the neo-feminist novel, finally, 'portrays the condition of women in transition between the old ways and the new, and their responses to the shifting of their identities and aspirations' (277).

If revenge is one aspect of Weldon's early plots, family chronicle is another. M.H.Abrams notes that 'unlike the modern historian, most chroniclers tended to take their information as they found it, and made little attempt to separate fact from legend' (1957:24). Though modern, Jocelyn - the mysterious first-person narrator who introduces each chapter, identifying herself only in the concluding chapter - has some of the qualities of an ancient chronicler. She does not differentiate between the value of gossip, hearsay, anecdote and popular wisdom on the one hand, and verifiable incident on the other. The imperative of the narrative is thus a feminist one: to deny the currency of opinion and belief would be to obscure the extent to which women are formed and directed by myths (a topic which I will go on to discuss in relation to *Down Among the Women*); it would mean, in fact, the writing of history rather than her-story. The incompatibility of these two stories is highlighted in the novel by sudden departures from the women-centred world. Interpolated references to the death of Stalin (115), the Suez crisis (132), or even the pub in Oxford Street where the poet Dylan Thomas holds court (69), act as reminders of the disconnection between the public world of male affairs and the undocumented, but nevertheless dramatic lives of women.

Narrative itself, and in particular the romance plot with its imperative to contain an individual woman legally, economically and sexually within a heterosexual union, has been identified as an accomplice of a repressive ideology.<sup>10</sup> The epistemological control usually exercised by the narrator in such stories - especially in the withholding and opportune revealing of sequential events - is perverted by the narrator in *Down Among the Women*. In a witty parody of power and authority, this narrator makes such announcements as, 'Later, Byzantia is to forget to visit Helen, and Helen dies' (71), and 'They [Scarlet and Susan] do not meet again for years' (100). There is a double irony here, of course, since the narrator withholds one crucial piece of information. However, the effect of the final revelation that the novel has been partially narrated by one of its own characters, Jocelyn, is not ultimately shocking, nor does it significantly alter the import of what

we have read. It does not, for example, imply that Jocelyn is the character most likely to inspire sympathy: the story is about women, not a woman.<sup>11</sup>

A further way in which the normal process of narrative is subverted is by disconcerting reference to the reading process itself. The narrator reassures us that 'there is more to life than death':

There is for one thing, fiction. A thousand thousand characters to be sent marching out into the world to divert time from its forward gallop to the terrible horizon. (172)

Less apocalyptically but no less startlingly, Chapter Five begins: 'There will now be a short intermission' (61). This stresses the passivity of our role as readers, mocks our unhealthy appetite for entertainment (the snacks we are offered are the most dire examples of junk food), and reminds us of the arbitrary construction of narrative. Comfortable expectations are not met; the plot in which a group of women wait for husbands (*Pride and Prejudice*, for which Weldon wrote a screenplay in 1978, being a classic example) is reversed in *Down Among the Women*. Weldon compresses chronology so that courtship and bliss (as in the case of Butch and Sylvia) are almost immediately superseded by disaffection, verbal and finally physical abuse. Yet with the exception of Byzantia (whose remarks preface this chapter), the women in the novel still see men as central to their existence and the likely repositories of any happiness they might have the potential to obtain. 'If only some man would come along and rescue me' (174), cries Audrey-Emma when Paul has driven her to distraction. This paradox informs the novel's treatment of sisterhood, since the women share a common plight from which they can only envisage escaping by the infliction of further suffering on their sisters. A forty-five-year-old spinster offers this perspective on the problem:

Women ... I used to blame men for women's condition, not now. In the end men are irrelevant. Women are happy or unhappy, fulfilled or unfulfilled, and it has nothing to do with men.

(FF:187)

By foregrounding the women and their lament, Weldon reverses the traditional position of the female chorus on the sideline. This can also be linked to Nina Auerbach's thesis that 'as a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone' (1978:5). Thus Weldon refrains from selecting one single protagonist, setting her novel 'down here among the women who like to describe people by their relationship with others' (30).

Much of the humour in *Down Among the Women* stems from Weldon's brilliant undercutting of the notion of male potency by undermining male sexuality. Objects of her ridicule include Sylvia's Sales Director who 'is in the habit of telling her in detail on the way home in his Riley of exactly what he wants to do to her, this way and that, in bed. Thus he expends himself and saves the effort of an actual seduction' (44). Another 'master of seduction' is Sylvia's Scottish Earl who 'takes her home to his studio [where] in a specially constructed box, in an effort to trap the forces of the orgasm, they copulate' (70). By mocking their prowess, Weldon highlights the irony of women's continuing enthrallment to the heroic myth. But in a more sinister sense, the men in *Down Among the Women* use sex as a form of ego-boosting; the sex acts they perform, therefore, have more to do with their relationships with other men. Helen's lover Carl, for example, desires to be part of the creative world represented by X: he 'roots and plunges, hour after hour, conscious not so much of her, but that here X has gone before' (147). Philip joins Jocelyn in her single bed after he has taken a client 'to a blue film or a strip club' (115). Edwin tells Scarlet an improbable story of how 'as a young man, he and a friend both managed to seduce and make pregnant a farmer's wife - and then left the district' (125).

These tales of women used as mere pawns in the greater game of male politics culminate in Philip's prostitution of Jocelyn as a way of impressing a business client. Women are thus, at times unwittingly, reduced to the level of

debased tokens of exchange in their ongoing quest for romance. Perhaps one of the best arguments for the selection of Jocelyn as narrator is the fact that she has come face to face with this truth. In the chapter named 'Solutions', a new doxology invites us to praise 'fallen women' and urges us to raise a monument in the heart of the London Stock Exchange and call it 'the Tomb of the Unknown Whore' (200). As Jocelyn knows, such a monument could have no more appropriate setting.

In Weldon's analysis of society which emerges from *Down Among the Women*, women acquire power through association with one another, and lose it through association with men. Reiterating an idea first expressed by Esther in *The Fat Woman's Joke* ('There should be apartheid between the sexes. Men and Women should unite only for the purpose of rearing children' [83]), the narrator describes Wanda's frustration with her divorcée's support group:

She has tried to indicate to them that life without men is possible, even desirable, for women past child-bearing age, and that in fact the sum of human happiness and achievement would be increased by apartheid between the sexes, but still they persist in longing for the company of men; reject lesbianism as a solution to sexual frustration, curl their hair, put on lipstick, and try to look younger than they are. Why? Because they can only seem to exist in relationship with men.

(104)

The bestowing of identity upon females by males is amusingly enacted in the character and actions of Edwin, Scarlet's feeble elderly husband. Unhappy with Byzantia's unconventional name, Edwin insists on offering more suitable alternatives. He refers variously to Scarlet's daughter as 'Edna', 'Rosemary', 'Annabel' and 'Edwina', at least two of these names bearing a significant resemblance to his own. Nor is this the only example of male manipulation of female identity in the novel: Paul renames Audrey 'Emma'. When Byzantia later contemplates rechristening herself more prosaically 'Joan', this is indicative of her generation's reassertion of their prerogatives.

The failure of the earlier women to establish their identity in relationship to one another rather than in relationship to men is based on the economic and

emotional dependency discussed at the beginning of this chapter. This dependency traps women in fruitless, repetitive and unfulfilling tasks which in turn create low self-esteem. Jocelyn's litany emphasises not only the monotony of the domestic routine, but the sense in which it is a self-perpetuating activity:

We are the cleaners. We empty the ashtrays which tomorrow will be filled again. We sweep the floors which tomorrow will be dusty. We cook the food and clean the lavatory pans. We pick up the dirty clothes and wash and iron them. We make the world go round.

(83)

While the lament itself is drawn out, the reason for its perpetuation is almost glossed over by Jocelyn:

'Yes, God,' we say, 'here's your slippers and your nice hot dinner. In the meantime just feed us, keep us, fetch the coal and say something nice while you're about it.'

(83-4)

The present tense and the pronoun 'we', used throughout *Down Among the Women* despite its broad time span and the variety of women described, suggest that the predicament of women has not changed. Only the last line of the novel: 'We are the last of the women' (234), predicts a break in tradition. The uneasy relationships between mother and daughter in this novel, as in *Female Friends*, indicate that the characters are aware, however subconsciously, of the restrictive nature of tradition. Wanda, whose profession, significantly, is that of teacher, breaks the tradition by explicitly refuting the notion that anatomy is destiny: 'There is more to a woman...than her tits, her arse and cunt' (25); but she cannot see any way out, or, rather, up: 'down here among the women we have no option but to stay. So says Scarlet's mother Wanda' (5).

Jocelyn, who has been responsible for prefacing almost every chapter with tales of how the body dictates to women - in terms of contraception and contractions, difficult babies and pregnant brides, aged wives and young prostitutes, addiction and shoplifting - is, as we have seen, herself not so much a victim of biology as of ideology. Like Praxis in Weldon's eponymous later novel, Jocelyn

commits a crime against a child: she 'accidentally' lowers her son into a scalding hot bath:

There is, of course, no such thing as an accident. I did it on purpose to my child, because he looked like Philip. (231)

As in *Praxis*, Weldon invites us to judge this action in the context of preceding events. The child's misfortune is to look like its father, whose maltreatment of Jocelyn (when he turns her into a prostitute for the night) is exacerbated by her acceptance of and collusion in the incident. Their marriage falters and collapses as a result, but Jocelyn admits: 'It was my doing as much as his. Yet, because he was my husband, I had expected him to save me from myself' (230). Both the event and its consequences are a paradigm for female oppression. Jocelyn agrees to go along with Philip because she fears he will lose his job, thus her economic dependency demands that she willingly debase herself. Paradoxically (because she still subscribes to the myth of husband-hero), she expects Philip to rescue her from her own abasement. When he fails to do so (the act he performs on his wife is a demonstration of potency by one man to another; to save her he would have to abase himself), her marriage cannot withstand the disappointment and the shattering of illusions.

*Down Among the Women*, then, is a novel which insists that we examine the condition of women against the backdrop of myths, old wives' tales, received wisdom and stock jokes. Jocelyn, passing on two 'nasty stories' told to her by a neighbour, prefaces them with the following definition: 'Myths are not true. Myths simply answer a need. But what kind of need can it be, down here among the women?' (171). The two stories are typical urban myths and what is so fascinating about them is that they both refer to castration. In the first, a boy has to go to the gents by himself but never returns: 'They'd cut off his willy and he'd bled to death' (171). In the second, a little girl who has overheard her mother's threat to cut off her brother's penis whenever he is incontinent, proudly announces: 'It's all right, Mummy. He was a naughty boy again, but I cut it off' (172). Going back to

Jocelyn's question, there can be no denying that there is a strong vein of wishful castration running through *Down Among the Women*. It is related, perhaps, to the rather wistful statement that 'down here among the women you don't get to hear about man maltreated' (61). Listening to the endless tales of 'man seducer, man betrayer, man deserter, man the monster' (61) has caused the narrator to retaliate with tales of the arch-seducer, Kim, dying in mid-intercourse, of the impotent Edwin cataloguing railway bridges, or of the perverse Byzantia losing interest in Simeon 'the moment he actually manages to achieve an erection' (216-7). These subversive narrative jokes are invoked at the expense of male characters whose sexuality has been the key to the unhappiness of the women.<sup>12</sup>

Jokes represent a moment of release from tension in which we may laugh at things which we really feel inhibited by or distressed about. The jokes in *Down Among the Women* concern sexual infidelity (the amorous milkman who announces his arrival by sticking his penis through the letterbox and has to think quickly when confronted with the cuckolded husband); doubtful paternity (the young mother unable to respond to royalty's question about whether her baby takes after its father as said gentleman 'never took his hat off' [26]), and fear of incest (the Officer shown into a room of a high-class brothel where he encounters his sister).

These jokes serve as a reminder of how much 'information' is passed on verbally, and how much of it is mythical in content. This idea is supported by the verbal quality of the narration, and the number of verbatim items inserted by Jocelyn. Thus women in the novel have to pick their way through an epistemological garbage heap which includes such maxims as 'The Catholics have agents in the condom factories - they prick one in every fifty rubbers with a pin with the Pope's head on it' (18) and 'A Good woman knows that nature is her enemy' (61). The demonstrable inaccuracy of such statements, presented and accepted as truth, is only a prelude to Weldon's larger project in *Down Among the Women*, namely the debunking of the far more subtle myths oppressing women.

\* \* \*

In the concluding chapter of *Down Among the Women*, Byzantia, with the fresh perspective of the 1970s, refers to the 'disease' afflicting her mother's generation. *Female Friends* (1975) is the pathology of the disease. The backdrop of World War II enables Fay Weldon to make a complex study of female antagonism in the absence of men, the terrible legacy of self-oppression passed on from mother to daughter and the consequent failure of women to achieve self-fulfilment. 'There is no point in raking up the past' (6): *Female Friends* explicitly rejects this comment by Chloe's husband Oliver. The novel's imperative is an archaeological one; by tracing the daughter back to the mother it pursues the origins of women's disservice to one another. As a corollary of its historical perspective, *Female Friends* also introduces what is to become one of the author's favourite themes: the interplay of destiny and accident, fate and mere chance.

Is it fate or accident that throws the young evacuees Marjorie and Chloe into the same train compartment, and causes them to be disgorged 'by mistake' at Ulden, where Grace's father heads the reception committee? The narrator assures us that 'there is no such thing as an accident' (21). In the novel, female friendship derives more from the sharing of a common lot (as exemplified by the crowded train compartment of women and children) than from compatibility. The issue of fate is so crucial to Weldon's novel because if her aim is 'to determine the cause of female bondage' (Cooper, 1974:115), then she must first confront the perception that that bondage has been somehow ordained. When Chloe's mother dies after her hysterectomy, 'as if that tiny, useless organ was the very mainspring of her being' (19), this incident appears to lend credence to the idea that anatomy is destiny. The key to reading this statement, however, lies in Chloe's timely insertion of the disparaging phrase 'as if'. Knowing how easy it is to credit such theories, Weldon problematizes the whole issue of destiny. She over-emphasizes the hand of God, for example, to the point of absurdity:

You might think, indeed, that God has taken a special dislike to Gwyneth. First He kills her father in a mining accident, and her mother of grief. Then He presents her, nice young Welsh girl that she

is, living with her Nan and top of the class in Home Economics, with a handsome young miner, David Evans by name, to love and marry.

(37)

Not content to stop here, the irrepressible narrator insists that 'the heavenly Hypocrite' leads David Evans to the conviction that he is not a miner but a painter and 'makes Gwyneth pregnant and ill'. This weird deity 'sends bad weather' so that David's lung condition develops into tuberculosis, and he is 'finally taken to the Heavenly Arms when Chloe is five' (37-8).

The doubts raised by such narrative tricks invite a deeper consideration of what causes a young and gifted girl to marry and submit unquestioningly to her husband's whims. The metaphor of infection is pertinent here; Gwyneth effectively 'infects' Chloe when she teaches her self-sacrifice and steadfast passivity:

Understand and forgive, says Gwyneth. Understand husbands, wives, father, mothers. Understand dog-fights above and the charity box below, understand fur-coated women and children without shoes. Understand school - Jonah, Job and the nature of the Deity: understand Hitler and the Bank of England and the behaviour of Cinderella's sisters. Preach acceptance to wives and tolerance to husbands; patience to parents and compromise to the young. Nothing in this world is perfect; to protest takes the strength needed for survival. Grit your teeth, endure. Understand, forgive, accept, in the light of your own death, your own inevitable corruption. What is there to want that's reasonable to want?

(46)

Gwyneth also teaches the suppression of logic. She instils in Chloe acceptance of double standards and anomalies everywhere: the glory of war contrasted with the poverty of ordinary people, the discrepancy between rich and poor, the nobility of suffering as exemplified in Job, and the betrayal of women. Most debilitating is her doctrine that to protest is to deplete the resources needed for mere survival and that, in any case, there is nothing 'that's reasonable to want'.

But in *Female Friends* what there is 'that's reasonable to want' is self-fulfilment. In her inquiry into the question of reasonable desire, Weldon brings to light the painful but amusing discrepancy between excessive male requirements and

disproportionate female self-denial. When she interviews Françoise for the job as her 'replacement' (145), Chloe describes her husband's needs thus:

He needs peace and quiet and a tidy house if he's to function properly. His digestion is delicate, he cannot eat eggs, they give him stomach cramps. He will not eat carbohydrates for he is watching his weight, and we steer clear as much as possible of animal fats for fear of cholesterol in his blood-stream. Within these limits, he likes to eat very well. He has a light continental breakfast in bed - just coffee and bread and butter, but the bread must be fresh, which means we make our own. I'll continue to do that in the meantime - I let the dough rise overnight and then pop the loaves in the oven an hour before his breakfast. As for coffee, it must be made with freshly ground beans - he cannot bear the taste of instant coffee. (144)

The stress placed upon his physical requirements - especially food - has the effect of portraying Oliver as an infant in need of constant oral gratification. Lacking power elsewhere ('he rules at home and nowhere else' [6]), Oliver creates an autocracy in his domestic environment.

The image of insatiability created in the description above is so appropriate because Chloe is practically subsumed by Oliver and his needs. He consumes her in the sense that she abandons her own studies in order to channel her energies into his sexual and academic requirements. Later, when she gets a job far below her capabilities - selling twinsets - this attempt to feed her own needs falls victim to Oliver's more pressing demands on her time. He manages - at considerable cost - to stop the publication of her novel, which, he claims, is libellous. Thus he refuses her the right to self-expression, and declares any attempt of hers to exist outside the very narrow boundaries laid down by himself (including visiting her friends in London), to be suspect or illegal. The narrator's comment on female subservience is an extension of the food metaphor: 'You ask for bread, and get given stones' (57).

The historical setting of the novel is carefully integrated with its thematic concerns. World War II, which Weldon explicitly parallels with the war between the sexes, was also about territorial jealousy and the requisitioning of resources. In *Female Friends*, men are colonizers. The perfect image for this is Edwin's

proclamation of Esther's flower beds as a vegetable patch. Edwin's occupation of female space is further demonstrated in the incestuous relationship which Grace alleges took place. Sexual domination of the household is also reflected in Oliver's exercise of his *rites de seigneur* over Francoise. His invasion of female privacy and sexual integrity is complete when he instigates a scene of lesbian caressing between his wife and the *au pair*, halting the action at his own discretion in order to have *his* way with the servant. Patrick Bates makes several conquests of the female body: Marjorie, Grace and Chloe are all at one time 'had' by him. He extends his dominion by propagating children, and two children by two different mothers are born on the same day.

In contrast to the men who feed and expand their own interests, the women in *Female Friends* are haunted by a terrible sense of emptiness, an irony when we take into account the extent to which they have been possessed sexually. Chloe's silent daily prayer to her husband ends 'fill me, fill my empty spaces. Complete me' (79). The narrator goes on to underline the futility of her cry: 'Chloe knows she can never be filled' (80). Even Marjorie, who has a successful career at the BBC, complains:

I have a hollow inside me, a bottomless pit, and you could shovel all the husbands and children in the world into me, and still it wouldn't be filled up. It's the same with Grace. We none of us will ever get what we needed.

(45)

The chronic dissatisfaction of these three women stems, ironically enough, from failures in female friendship. In the first place, they are not adequately nurtured by their mothers. Marjorie's mother, Helen, abandons her in order to pursue her affairs with men; Grace's mother, Esther, allows her husband to tyrannize them (the classic disappointment is the picnic cancelled because Edwin feels Esther has slighted him); Chloe's mother gives her nothing except, paradoxically, the acceptance of nothing as her lot. They are, at the end of the war, 'the walking wounded' (235). Not only have their mothers been remiss, as 'female friends' they have unfortunately been as

'thick as thieves' in a quite different sense from what is usually meant by that expression:

What did they steal from each other, Marjorie, Grace and Chloe?  
Everything, in their desperate youth. Parents, lovers, children, a  
vision of themselves.

(107)

The novel ends with the defiant departure of Chloe and her children: at last she is given her own space - Marjorie's house in London. Marjorie has a hysterectomy and thrives; Grace consents to be a mother. But the tone is not ebullient or hopeful. The narrator speaks to the woman reading the book ('pretty little sister, on your feathered cushion' [236]), and warns her to

Take family snaps, unashamed. Dress up for weddings, all weddings.  
Rejoice at births, all births. For days can be happy - whole futures  
cannot. This is what grandmama says. This moment now is all you  
have. These days, these nights, these moments one by one.

(236)

Fay Weldon's first three novels investigate the power base of patriarchy with wit and verve and, in the absence of any real redress, they seek a retributive justice. For the women themselves, the only option open is departure from home, with the result that the concluding lines of both *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends* seem to come to us from no-man's-land. These novels offer a critique of female impotence; only the narrator is able to exert control on their behalf. Miserably unfulfilled and uncomfortable as wives, mothers and domestic drudges, Weldon's early protagonists are nevertheless unable to re-vision themselves. In her subsequent novels this unhappy stasis is broken. Madeleine - in *Remember Me* - and Praxis announce 'I am' with the hard-won certainty of women who know how uncertain - and indeed specious - all definition can be.

## Endnotes

1. Michelene Wandor's book *On Gender and Writing* is, in fact, a collection of autobiographical writings. Weldon chose to construct her entry in the form of an interview because 'asked to write about myself I become apologetic, afraid of boasting, revealing intimacy or claiming an importance to which I am not entitled.' 'Me and My Shadows' is based on interviews given between 1976 and 1980.
2. Historically speaking, the fight for women's rights has gone through many phases and has been fought in diverse arenas, from suffrage to employment, education and contraception. The 1960s saw a particularly strong resurgence of feminism, partly owing to socio-economic factors that put more women in the workplace. The effects of 1960s consciousness-raising are still being played out today, notably in the 'backlash' documented by Faludi and French (both 1992).
3. Kathleen Dehler, 'The Need to Tell All: A Comparison of Historical and Modern Feminist "Confessional" Writing' in *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose*, ed. Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson.
4. Excellent feminist analyses of motherhood include *Of Woman Born* (1977) by Adrienne Rich and *Inventing Motherhood* (1982) by Ann Dally.
5. The idea that, as Virginia Woolf puts it in *Three Guineas* (1938), a woman is an 'outsider' who has 'no country', is exemplified in the character of the aptly named Wanda in *Down Among the Women*, who moves from habitation to habitation with her squares of portable linoleum.
6. To Jane Graham in *The L-Shaped Room*, this option 'seemed like tearing up a bill instead of paying it' (136), a wonderful example of how conscience constrains women.
7. In her *Time* magazine interview in 1973, she states:  
 What I write seems to be the common experience, rooted in children-washing-shopping-cancer-death and all the rest of the messy things women are caught up in. I like women, and I am aware of their wasted potential.

She also reveals, in 'Me and My Shadows' that she assumes her readers 'are all women' (Wandor, 1983:163).

8. As Helen Moglen puts it in '(Un) Gendering the Subject: Towards a Feminist Theory of the Novel':

Through the use of multiple narrative strategies, novelists mediate between experience and theory, suggesting alternative readings of the realities that they seek to represent, employing determinate generic structures and linguistic codes to contain their own intimations of indeterminacy. Because novelists create, interrogate and live within the societies that they project, they consciously challenge cultural codes which they also, at times unconsciously, transmit and reinforce.

(1992:77)

9. In her excellent book, *The Writing or The Sex? or why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good*, Dale Spender investigates the negative responses of male reviewers to female writing:

I believe it is the very existence of women's knowledge that poses the fundamental threat to male superiority: It is knowledge derived from women's different position in society, a position which men do not share, and which develops a very different view of the world. Women know things men do not know; because of the way women relate to men, women know things about men that men may not know about themselves. And this view of the world - and of men - is powerfully inscribed in women's literature and presents a threat to men's knowledge and explanations. Women's writing, like women's conversation, is often a testimony to what men have left out - and why!

(1989:109)

10. This has been convincingly argued by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in *Writing beyond the Ending* (1985).

11. Interviewed by *Time* in 1973, Fay Weldon confesses, 'Scarlet is a portrait of me when I was younger', thus opening up the question of sympathetic identification in the novel.

12. Weldon's phallic humour is not symptomatic of penis-envy, but the reverse. This type of sexual jesting may well be one of the main reasons why men dislike, and not infrequently deplore, Fay Weldon's fiction. John Naughton offers a humorous description of how one of Weldon's novels strikes the male reader:

[*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is] the kind of book which takes the (male) reader firmly by the windpipe and shakes him vigorously until nearly dead, then jumps up and down on his abdomen with hob-nailed boots, and yet leaves him pathetically grateful for the experience.

(1986: 39)

## Chapter Two

*Remember Me* (1976)

*Little Sisters* (1977)

*Praxis* (1978)

Praxis Duveen, at the age of five, sitting on the beach at Brighton, made a pretty picture for the photographer. (5)

Thus begins Fay Weldon's sixth and most highly-praised novel. I draw attention to this 'sense of a beginning' intentionally, for it is the notion of origin - of a first cause from which all later effects can be said to be derived - that becomes problematic in Fay Weldon's fiction of the late 1970s. The opening sentence of *Praxis* provides a useful, if arbitrary, starting point for a discussion of how Weldon's methods 'break the sentence', disrupt the sequence of conventional narrative, and in so doing, destabilize all notion of the self as a steady and constant source of meaning.

This is partly a function of her narrative strategy, which I shall review in terms of Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Seen in this light, Weldon's novels mimic speech (suggested by the proliferation of the pronoun 'I' and the multiplicity of voices, codes and genres she employs), as well as the silences between utterances

(imaged in the numerous paragraph breaks, the short chapters, the alternation between third- and first-person narration). Her interruptions and interpolations, her commands to 'Listen!', permit us to view her characters only as they are constituted in language, and therefore as shifting, contradictory, protean.

From a feminist point of view, the advantage of a subject who is always in some sense an interim projection, is that entrenched definitions of femininity, often based on the oppressive dichotomy of angel/whore, can be turned into a subversive entertainment. Thus this chapter will also draw on a substantial body of feminist cultural criticism which rejects confinement in favour of 'the wonder of being several' (Cixous in Robinson, 1988:105). A brief summary of *Remember Me*, *Little Sisters* and *Praxis*, will reveal female protagonists whose perpetually transitional, elusive and itinerant qualities confirm Gardiner's proposition that 'a central question of feminist literary criticism is, Who is there when a woman says, "I am"?' (Abel, 1982:178).

In a progression from her initial satirical exposé of the domestic drudgery, sexual betrayal and emotional abuse inflicted upon women, Weldon's novels under consideration here offer a more complex investigation of how that oppression is constituted in the myths and beliefs that sustain society. As I have suggested, chief among these is the myth of identity, specifically female identity. Since feminist and poststructuralist theories alike have contributed to the philosophical disarray in which the self finds itself (or doesn't), my reading of *Remember Me* (1976), *Little Sisters* (1977), and *Praxis* (1978) will combine these theoretical approaches. Finally, because I want to pursue my discussion of the destabilized self and of Weldon's correspondingly unsettling narrative technique, using *Remember Me* and *Praxis* as representative examples, I shall delay my discussion of them as separate entities until the second half of this chapter.

\* \* \*

In *Remember Me*, Madeleine, ex-wife of Jarvis, dies in a road accident, but returns to haunt Jarvis and Lily, Margot and Philip, the couples at the centre of the action.

They inhabit the novel's carefully delineated middle-class milieu while Madeleine operates from the margins. The spectral quality of this novel, in which the deceased Madeleine takes possession of Margot's body, is enhanced by a strange narrative 'presence'. I am referring to the ubiquitous use of the present tense and of verbless exclamations ('Unfair!'; 'Lucky Hilary!'). The shade of Madeleine eventually acquires more substance than the fully documented domesticity that is everywhere apparent. Under Madeleine's eerie direction, her daughter Hilary finds a home with her biological father (Philip, not Jarvis) and Madeleine/Margot.

The novel which followed *Remember Me - Little Sisters* - also draws on fantasy genres, in this case Gothic horror and fairytale. The lovers, Victor and Elsa, are invited to spend a weekend with the tasteless millionaires, Hamish and Gemma. Their mansion is a nightmarish amalgam of styles, some might say reflective of the novel itself. Like Rumpelstiltskin, the elderly Victor slips into Elsa's room at night - to do her typing. Meanwhile his paralysed wife schemes to have Elsa impregnated by her husband. There is a yet more bizarre tale within the tale as Gemma recounts her life story which involves severed fingers, stolen rings, murder, attempted murder and princely rescue. The fantastic and the bizarre are well-recognized and often effective elements of Weldon's fiction, but in this novel they are employed merely for thrill value, and for this reason I will not offer any further discussion of *Little Sisters* here. Part of the problem is that Weldon has moved out of her usual social milieu of the poor-to-average-income middle class. We discover that - at least in this instance - a Fay Weldon novel without social commentary, a recognisable and satirically documented locale, and characters battling with energy and wit against the vicissitudes of life, is nothing more than a potboiler. The appreciable difference in quality between *Little Sisters* - about which there is so little to say - and Fay Weldon's subsequent novel, *Praxis* - which demands serious critical consideration - is an early warning of the author's uneven output.

The continuity from title - *Praxis* - to first word - Praxis - would seem to confirm expectations of a traditional text narrating the life of a protagonist whose

development, or history, or even unbridled episodic antics, will provide the novel with unity and cohesion. But the liberal humanist assumption that, in Catherine Belsey's words, there exists 'a world of non-contradictory (and therefore fundamentally unalterable) individuals whose unfettered consciousness is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action' (1980:67) is undercut in *Praxis*, Fay Weldon's most accomplished and acclaimed novel. It has been described by A.S.Byatt as 'the single best modern novel about the condition of women' (1979:10), and was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1979. The title, as Weldon explains in a talk recorded by Olga Kenyon, has several connotations:

Praxis is a Victorian girl's name; it also means orgasm and for a Marxist it's the moment when theory takes actual practical form. (1988:114)

Apart from the meanings Weldon imputes to her title, the reader brings a more conventional set, possibly derived from Collins Dictionary:

1. the practice and practical side of a profession or field of study, as opposed to the theory. 2. a practical exercise. 3. accepted practice or custom. (Harks, 1979:1151)

Heterogeneity is therefore inscribed in the title, and maintained in the narrative arrangement which distinguishes first- and third-person voices, present and past, action and reflection, certainty and doubt.

In the alternate chapters narrated in the first-person, the narrator re-states her name, 'I, Praxis Duveen', pointing to the novel's underlying search for identity beyond socially defined boundaries. This quest is not confined to one woman, though it is represented through one, nor is it backward looking. There is a joke in *Praxis* which mocks any probing of the past in the hope of locating a first cause, the moment when identity can be said to have its genesis. Miss Leonard (Praxis's sometime guardian) falls pregnant after a night of debauchery. She poses as a prostitute and consorts with a man, his son and an American GI. Later she wonders whose baby she is carrying: 'The father's, the son's, or the American's?' (79). The

profane echo of the holy trinity confirms Weldon's deliberately subversive muddling of origins.

Praxis is never presented to us as a unitary character progressing toward personal fulfilment in the form of worldly achievement or harmonious integration into society. Not only does she appear in several metamorphoses (orphan, student, housewife, whore, career woman, feminist, convict), her initiation into the trials of womanhood (onset of menstruation, first confrontation with a penis, loss of virginity, motherhood, adultery, divorce, protest and revolt) imply that she is Everywoman. Praxis is constantly differing from herself (in the Derridean sense) so that it is difficult to talk about a novel of development, where the central character reaches some point of culmination. Nevertheless, in *Praxis* there is progression, in that the eponymous heroine, after a lifetime enacting a variety of socially determined 'feminine roles', is converted to feminism, and subsequently smothers a Down's Syndrome baby in her first entirely voluntary act. Having survived an odyssey through pain, loneliness, poverty, alienation and advertising, the protagonist reaches a point where she feels she has finally gained the right to name herself:

I, Praxis Duveen. Let them carve that name upon my headstone, if I have a grave. Let them engrave it upon the urn which holds my ashes. It was the name I started with: I have changed it often enough since; and seldom for the better.

(37)

Many of the roles played by Praxis reflect the male-defined limits of female existence. That this is to be a major preoccupation is evident from the fact that the novel opens, as we have seen, with a photo session in which Praxis's infantile prettiness is captured by Henry Whitechapel.<sup>1</sup> The occasion carries its own sense of naturalness and even of inevitability: pretty little girls are eminently worthy of being captured on film. With some relish at the contrast between these two visions of womanhood, the narrator opens chapter two with a description of her present state of decay: cracked elbow, wiry grey hair, watery eyes, swollen veins and lumpy figure.

The stable and verifiable world projected in the opening sentence is doubly undermined: it is only a memory, and has already been replaced by a radically

different set of circumstances. The eternal logic of beginning-middle-end which the sequential introduction of name (Praxis Duveen), age (five), and setting (the beach at Brighton) seemed to inscribe in the narrative, is similarly inverted. By taking us almost immediately to the end of Praxis's life, but not to the end of the novel, Weldon exposes the arbitrary nature of these categories. She herself has said (in her interview with Olga Kenyon) that 'our lives seem chaotic, though we try to impose some pattern on experience; now novels impose a pattern with beginning, middle and end, and .... give us the illusion that shape and order is possible [sic]' (1989:192).

Yet the snapshot still carries with it the impression of a moment of genesis, before which there was nothing. Perhaps the comfort this scene offers is shared by the readers of all novels which begin with the birth or early childhood of the protagonist. Privileged to have been there from the outset, the veritable dawn of creation, there will be no blanks which might impede our comprehension.<sup>2</sup> Barely a page later the narrator pursues an earlier antecedent to this scene of infancy, namely Mrs Duveen's antenatal existence:

When she was seventeen she had married a young army officer. (8)

The fact that here we are drawn briefly into a narrative that is anterior to the life history of Praxis Duveen does not - for the ordinary reader - compromise the status of the opening assertion. Only one who deconstructs, such as Derrida, will refuse to be convinced by the nascent moment:

... Derrida's interpretation shows ... that what is thus designated as a moment of presence always has to posit another, prior moment and so implicitly loses its privileged status as a point of origin.

(Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 115)

The original presence is, as de Man articulates it, an

ontological assumption [which] both conditions and depends on a certain conception of language or voice over written language (*écriture*) in terms of presence and distance: the unmediated presence

of the self to its own voice as opposed to the reflective distance that separates this self from the written word.

(114)

Authority, authenticity, truth, presence: the concepts interrogated by poststructuralists have been identified by feminists as the ideological property of patriarchy. Women are marginal, spurious, absent. As my discussion of the opening sentence of *Praxis* shows, Weldon takes a special delight in playing games of narrative hide-and-seek in which authority is posited and then withdrawn, the truth is reneged upon, and presence turns out to be absence.

Weldon's talent as a ventriloquist - she has perfected the art of 'throwing' her voice so that narration is disguised as articulation - facilitates an impression of naturalness that casts aside all mediation, separation and reflection. The direct and homely content of so many of her textual utterances deludes the reader further into believing that the author (the ultimate source of meaning, so it is believed) is present, and that what follows is authentic, spontaneous, truly a 'heart-to-heart'. Weldon's narrator in both *Remember Me* and *Praxis* is erratic and unpredictable, yet it is this all too human evidence of fallibility which invokes a duplicitous sense of 'presence'. The arch and insistently jolly tone ('Good morning!') and the excessively clichéd commands - 'Cross the road when you see Alsatians coming, don't walk under ladders, keep a civil tongue in your head' (*RM*:39) - appear to be derived from an individual experience rather than any privileged source.

At the same time, the sweeping nature of such authorial comments exceeds the boundaries of personal knowledge painstakingly demarcated by the first person. Fay Weldon's favoured narrative technique of generalization and didactic commentary gives the impression of 'speech'. Paradoxically, her loquacious narrators redirect our attention to the sheer artifice, the inescapably 'written' nature of Weldon's texts.<sup>3</sup> Thus although Roller, in *The Politics of the Feminist Novel*, is of the opinion that 'obtrusive authorial comment is jarring to the reader when encountered in a novel based on anti-authoritarianism and egalitarianism' (1986:51), utterances that parody the commanding authority of the narrator have the opposite

effect. It is through the human (and by implication, cognitively limited) voice of the narrator, which is also the voice we must believe to be omniscient, that Weldon subverts authoritarianism. By so vociferously asserting their 'presence', Weldon's narrators expose their own fictionality, and reassert their distance. Unaware of these philosophical considerations (*Writing and Difference* had only just been translated into English as she wrote *Praxis*), Weldon nevertheless evokes a very Derridean sense of a single illumination constantly deferred by the play of meanings that language allows. Derrida finds this aspect of language, 'the overflow of signification' (1978:12), emancipating from a formal, philosophical point of view. Weldon's playful prevarications are also emancipating, but in a more subversively feminist sense of the word. Her mercurial narration has the advantage of making all statements merely provisional: meaning is thus caught off guard.

Weldon's alternation between detachment and intimacy, writing and speaking voice, has metafictional implications:

... we are attracted to literature because it is obviously something other than ordinary communication; its formal and fictional qualities bespeak a strangeness, a power, an organization, a permanence which is foreign to ordinary speech. Yet the urge to assimilate that power and permanence or to let that formal organization work upon us requires us to make literature into a communication, to reduce its strangeness, and to draw upon supplementary conventions which enable it, as we say, to speak to us.

(in Culler, 1975:134)<sup>4</sup>

Culler's apology for the interpretive zeal of readers relies on the metaphor of familiarization. The recuperative act acquaints us with the foreign ('strange') text which, once translated, can 'speak to us'.

But just as Weldon draws attention to her own act of writing, so she foregrounds our reading enterprise. Moreover, she usurps it, and performs the hermeneutic task herself. For example, in *Remember Me*, the charade enacted in social situations is deciphered, and to this end the dialogues are helpfully 'translated'. Transcriptions are offered side by side with the 'originals', which her narrator refers to as 'riddles'. When Lily's dinner guests arrive in a quarrelsome mood, it is

Weldon's narrative persona, in her characteristic guise as soothsayer, who must help the reader. The dialogue begins,

JUDY: Lily, I'm sorry we're late. Jamie has no sense of direction. That's his trouble. When I pointed out we were driving round in a circle and it was symptomatic of his whole life, he hit me. Look! Is it bleeding? His nails are very sharp.

JAMIE: I apologise for Judy. She's been drinking. It's the depressed housewife syndrome.

(68)

This is 'interpreted' by the narrator:

There are few riddles left in such exchanges. Resentment, fear, rejection; the desire to hurt, the craving to be hurt; the tangle of love me in spite of me, see how you've wounded me, offered up and opened up for all the world to see. A cry for help, seldom answered. (69)

A highly pre-emptive strategy is in operation here: where no enigma might have been detected at all, one is forced upon us by the unexpected adoption of the hermeneutic code. If, as de Man argues, 'the work cannot be said to understand or to explain itself without the intervention of another language' (1971:108), then the narrator who reports these marital and domestic interchanges is not the same one who glosses them. By explicitly admitting that for readers to assimilate all the meanings and effects of the text, these must be 'recovered' on our behalf, Weldon offers a parody of structuralism. Whether consciously or not, her narrator seeks to interpret a text so as 'to bring it within the modes of order which culture makes available', and consequently initiates a process of 'recuperation, naturalization, motivation, *vraisemblabilisation*' (Culler, 1975:137).

The voice which explicates (naturalizes and makes accessible) the dialogue in *Remember Me* hopes to be mistaken for that of the empirical author, Fay Weldon, who insists on mediating her own writing. The implicit authorial claim that her

presence is required, seemingly confutes Derrida's definition of writing as 'a structure cut off from any absolute responsibility or from consciousness as ultimate authority, orphaned and separated since birth from the support of the father' (in Culler, 1975: 132). But Weldon's narrator merely imitates the author, whose absence is reconfirmed by the need for a surrogate.

What Bakhtin has described, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, as the 'auto-criticism of discourse' (412) is a subversive device through which the text advertises its own textuality, often through parody and pastiche, as a means of destabilizing meaning. So by offering an interpretation of the subtext of her characters' dialogue, Weldon herself instigates a proliferation of possible readings. She produces a poststructuralist text which insists on 'the plurality of language and the impossibility of fixing meaning once and for all' (Weedon, 1987:85) by questioning the accuracy of what is said. And though she playfully asserts her own authorial ability to supply the truth, because this latter assertion is ludic in nature, authenticity is negated twice in the same operation.

Despite the fact that her novels may seem to deconstruct themselves, as a highly vocal author Weldon is thoroughly resistant to the Derridean notion of the orphaned text. Derrida asserts that

To write is to produce a mark which constitutes in its turn a kind of productive mechanism, which my absence will not, as a matter of principle, prevent from functioning and provoking reading, from yielding itself up to reading and rewriting ... For writing to be writing it must continue to 'act' and be readable even if what we call the author of the writing be provisionally absent or no longer uphold what he has written, what he appears to have signed ... This essential drift, which is proper to writing as a structure of repetition, a structure cut off from any absolute responsibility or from consciousness as ultimate authority, orphaned and separated since birth from the support of the father, is indeed what Plato condemned in the *Phaedrus*.

(in Culler, 1975:132)

Weldon's reluctance to leave her novels alone, her insistence on entering them in various guises to comment, exclaim or disclaim is (to rephrase Derrida) not unlike the maternal instinct which forbids cutting off without support, orphaning,

separation from birth. In numerous published interviews she is all too willing to discourse on what she meant in a particular work. She dilates on where she wrote a work (under the kitchen table; in a hospital bed), her stylistic intentions ('humour is a sort of punctuation ... an amusing line will hurry you on to your deadline') and on her philosophy of literature in general ('there's a kind of cheerfulness in facing up to the savagery of the truth ... too few writers ... are preoccupied with the actual state of the world').<sup>5</sup> This is auto-criticism taken one step further, where the author continues to assert kinship with the text years after its publication.

Weldon's possessiveness may represent an incursion into the reader's prerogative, but she insists that her impulse is irresistible, and all in the interests of good fun:

In *Praxis* I tried to remove my remarks from the narrative. Though it's part of my pleasure to direct myself to the reader. You are not in theory supposed to do it too much; I also cut out most of the funny lines, so it was taken more seriously. But to keep myself in the book, I had the story related by an old woman; the commentary was removed from the main text, and fitted in chunks into *Praxis* herself. I wrote the end in hospital, waiting for my baby to be born. About a hundred pages from the end the pace seems to speed up, because I was writing uninterrupted, trying to get it finished in time.

(Kenyon, 1988:201)

Here Weldon ignores the protocol whereby the one who tells the story is referred to as the narrator; instead she firmly maintains her right to be present or absent at will. Her guardianship is reiterated in the cheerful conflation of expected dates of delivery: baby/manuscript are produced simultaneously. These reflections on her own narrative presence(s), like the guest appearances which occasion them, do not fix the work or explicate it in any final way. The range of subject positions adopted by Fay Weldon (author, narrator, narrator-as-author, interviewee, lecturer) only serves to defer meaning. Culler, in *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) barely conceals his irritation at authorial interference in the proper work of the reader:

The conventions of poetry, the logic of symbols, the operations for the production of poetic effects, are not simply the property of readers but

the basis of literary forms. However, for a variety of reasons it is easier to study them as the operations performed by readers than as the institutional context taken for granted by authors. The statements authors make about the process of composition are notoriously problematic, and there are few ways of determining what they are taking for granted. Whereas the meanings readers give to literary works and the effects they experience are much more open to observation.

(117)

The quiet, controlled conditions necessary for the empirical study of 'operations performed by readers' are undermined by a loud, bossy and possessive author. By talking constantly about her fiction, Weldon reminds us that it *is* fiction, dictated by convention, artifice and arbitrary choice. In this sense she violates the realist imperative which Barthes, in 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', links firmly to ideology:

Generally ... our society takes the greatest pains to conjure away the coding of the narrative situation: there is no counting the number of narrational devices which seek to naturalize the subsequent narrative by feigning to make it the outcome of some natural circumstance and thus, as it were, "disinaugurating" it: epistolary novels, supposedly rediscovered manuscripts, author who met the narrator, films which begin before the credits. The reluctance to declare its codes characterizes bourgeois society and the mass culture issuing from it: both demand signs that do not look like signs.

(1977:287)

In rebellion against such mimetic conventions, Weldon takes a postmodernist's delight in playing with the expectations they create.

*Praxis* is narrated by the eponymous heroine who claims the text as her own ('My manuscript is carefully sorted and safely between plastic folders'[282], she announces in the final chapter). But this 'manuscript' is not *Praxis*. The alternating chapters in which the time-worn Praxis, an ex-con now subsisting in her basement flat, reflects on the third-person narration of her own life story, are subsumed into the more comprehensive text which we hold in our hands. The tangibility of Praxis's putative literary creation is thus under suspicion. Because Praxis not only interrupts

the course of the narrative, but also casts doubts on the truth of what we have just read, the independent existence and veracity of her 'biography' are undermined. She tells her story, but then equivocates:

Was my mother in a strait-jacket, a real tangible, canvas strait-jacket, or is this merely how I envisage her? Do I pinion her in fact as she was pinioned in her mind, prevented by circumstance and her own nature from stretching her soul and encompassing Hypatia and myself in the warmth of unconditional love? Did Hypatia really stand Audrey Denver on her head to shake the rat-thoughts out of her brain? Of course not. But she stood me on mine, metaphorically, often enough, until I doubted the truth of my own perceptions.

(81)

As a consequence of the novel's structure, we are thrust into a shifting, relative world of existential doubt where the assumptions of patriarchal society may be called into question.

Praxis's commentary on what she has just read - or even written - suggests an important internal dialectic. For example, the second chapter (following on the introductory account of Praxis's distressed childhood) opens with the question, 'Now what kind of memory is that to comfort anyone?' (12). *Praxis* openly flouts mimetic conventions which usually produce externally unified, coherent prose fiction.

Bakhtin has shown that there is no such thing as a monolingual text. *Praxis* in fact invites recognition of its status as 'double-voiced discourse':

It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they - as it were - know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other.

(*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981: 324)

While this is particularly true of *Praxis*, where third- and first-person alternate in mimicry of polite discussion, Weldon's conversational, dialogic style and

method in general make her work a good illustration of the polyphony and 'heteroglossia' identified by Bakhtin as the most distinctive feature of the novel as genre:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.... Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized).

(1981:262-3)

\* \* \*

In *Remember Me*, the narrator prefaces the first of several monologues with the injunction: 'Listen now as Margot eavesdrops on herself, upon the babel of consciousness within; those multitudinous inner voices which ceaselessly define the self by shift and change, as the shore defines the sea and the sea defines the shore' (7). Here the dialogue is internal, conducted among the 'multitudinous inner voices', yet strives to become external, to be heard. The title - *Remember Me* - is the heartfelt cry of a voice (connoting immediacy, presence) that is at the same time absent (here once, but now only to be recalled). Its imperative presupposes an audience, a second party to the dialogue. Each character is given an opportunity of self-introduction with the prefatory exclamation 'Oh, I am ...'. Thus although we hear a polyphony of voices in *Remember Me*, each character is trapped within a soliloquy.

The enunciatory quality of *Remember Me* annuls the contract of silence that has prevented women's voices from being heard. If we will not listen (that is, perform the necessary mute part of any dialogue), then at least Weldon can force us to overhear, and to speculate. Do the words of the title, for example, connote a polite request or an urgent behest? Are they directed at Jarvis, at his second wife, or at a

larger audience? The voice that importunes us in the title protests against the muffling of all women's voices:

Oh, I am Madeleine, the first wife. I am the victim. I have right on my side. It makes me strong. I feed on misery. But I no longer have the strength to be unhappy, not all the time. It has been going on too long ... I keep myself still and silent by an act of will, when the only thing to give me peace would be to search out Jarvis, waylay him, attack him, mutilate him; shriek and scream and by the very dreadfulness of my behaviour, flying in the face of my own nature, which he knows so well, so well, demonstrate how much, how very much, he has hurt me, damaged me, destroyed me.

(16-17)

The 'act of will' which keeps Madeleine quiet muzzles a terrifying array of retributive actions (waylaying, attacking, mutilating, shrieking, screaming). Madeleine's casting of herself in a generic role ('the first wife'; 'the victim') implies that her repressive silence is applicable to her sex as a whole.

Weldon's dialogic novels insist that women 'speak up'. Her highly vocal female narrators and characters subvert the traditional belief that talkativeness is a female flaw. As Dale Spender explains, articulation is easily conflated with loquacity:

Once it is realised that silence is an attitude that men desire in women, there is no longer any apparent contradiction between the infrequency of women's utterances and the insistence that they talk too much. Quite simply, if a woman is expected to be quiet then any woman who opens her mouth can be accused of being talkative.

(1989:8-9)

Garrulousness, then, is an essential aspect of Weldon's enterprise and not surprisingly, critics have pinpointed this as a shortcoming in her novels. Victoria Glendinning, reviewing *Remember Me*, complains of the 'cacophony of self-definitions' (1976:1199), and Martin Amis dismisses *Little Sisters* as a 'generally rather garrulous novel' (1977:13). Excessive talkativeness is society's perennial complaint against women, a criticism which often serves to encourage silence.<sup>6</sup> In

mythical terms, to listen to the illicit voices of women (for example, the sirens) is fatal. In these three novels by Fay Weldon, we do nothing else.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, in traditional myths, demon women and female monsters (such as Medusa) are 'obstacles man encounters on the path of life, on his way to manhood, wisdom, and power; they must be slain or defeated so that he can go forward to fulfil his destiny - and his story' (de Lauretis, 1984:110).<sup>8</sup> Weldon violates this tradition by foregrounding angry demon women and restoring their voices. She grafts the fantastic onto carefully observed social reality, creating in narrative the sort of hybrid monster feared by men in their mythical exploits.<sup>9</sup>

Bakhtin sees genre play as the inevitable outcome of 'heteroglossia':

Let us pause finally on one of the most basic and fundamental forms for incorporating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel - "incorporated genres." The novel permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres and others). (320)

The heteroglossia of *Remember Me* incorporate the diverse languages of cultural documentary, fantasy and myth.

We have already seen how Weldon switches easily into the dramatic mode, transcribing dialogues using the play form, and she is just as likely to incorporate non-literary genres such as advertisements, lists, jokes, riddles and recipes. This bizarre flouting of narrative convention subverts the ideals embedded in those conventions:

... to the extent that narrative authorizes us to comprehend and make sense of life, to the extent that it thereby enables us to transcend life's vicissitudes, it articulates patriarchal thinking, in which order, control, and transcendence over the flux of nature are paramount and imaginable. (Rose, 1988:97)

*Remember Me* reverses these expectations through a cheerful mixing of genres. Weldon draws into her social satire of urban English mores elements from more fantastic genres such as ghost stories and fairytales:

Fay Weldon is one of the most accomplished fabulists around. Her fable is replete with the requisite cast of characters: scorned Queen turned Witch; selfish, vain younger Queen; Ugly Duckling Princess denied her rightful place by Wicked Stepmother; confused King ruled by Female Powers behind the throne; modest Lady-in-Waiting who steals the Princess for safekeeping.

(Schwartz, 1977:58)

We could add one more fabular feature adopted by the author: like any tale with a moral, *Remember Me* ends on a note of reconciliation. Lily is nice to Hilary; and all the characters assemble at Madeleine's grave, including Mr Quincey whose ulcer, we are delighted to hear, 'has all but healed' (219). Madeleine's death has brought 'Recognition, Realisation!' (220) which, typically, range from the ridiculous -

Oh, I am Hilary, daughter of a once-living mother, mother of children yet unknown. I shall never eat Sugar Puffs again.

(220)

to the sublime -

'I don't know what it's all about,' says Laurence to his mother, lifting his head from his O-level astronomy text book. 'Do you? You can find out any number of facts, but they don't seem to get you anywhere. And we're all so infinitesimal .... First you're born and then you die. Why?'

'I can only suppose,' says Margot, 'that we are here to consider the ways of the Creator, and be amazed.'

(222)

The massive switches in genre and register which such narrative acrobatics entail undermine all attempts to read the novel as a conventional piece of prose fiction.

In fact, *Remember Me* experiments with the limits of narrative by bringing the novel dangerously close to the genre that it is least like: drama. The sustained use of the present tense, the limited time span, the visual technique of cutting from one scene to another - owing much to television drama - and the 'scripted' dialogue, all threaten the limits of the novel form. These dramatic techniques, in addition to other narrative innovations, enrich *Remember Me*. I hope to demonstrate that the criticisms of reviewers such as John Braine - 'the book succeeds in spite of its

techniques not because of it' [sic] (1977:28) - and Neil Hepburn - '[*Remember Me*] reflects a crash course in ... diluted experimentalism' (1976:486) - are invalid. Both the supernatural and the highly naturalistic are skilfully employed in the novel.

Weldon's extensive experience in the field of television drama is reflected not only in visual effects, but in the tight structure of *Remember Me* (the action covers the day before Madeleine's death, the night of her death and the days immediately following her demise). The narrator shifts focus among four households (those of Lily and Jarvis, Margot and Philip, Madeleine and Hilary and Enid and Sam) with a lens-like eye. Indeed, the novel's voyeuristic attention to the finer details of dress, furnishing and food (Jarvis's Mao blue shirt; the Selfridge's crown roast; the Campari and soda in sugar-frosted glasses) establishes it as a comedy of manners.

Weldon's narrator confounds our expectations by supplying not realism but a parody of realism. This is effected chiefly through a copious use of statistics: the doctor and his wife have slept in the same bed 'for some fifteen years, and made love in it some 1,500 times' (6); 'Laurence tells Lettice that in the last 600,000 years some 74,000,000,000 people have been born and died' (53); and Margot cooks 'the 5,323rd dinner of her married life' (55). Rather than producing in us an agreeable sensation of realism, such statistics invite a contemplation of monotony. The intelligible world rendered up by the conventional realist text is here made unintelligible through a surplus of data. In this way, Weldon writes against comfortable, preconceived ideology, for as Culler points out

the basic convention which governs the novel - and which, *a fortiori*, governs those novels which set out to violate it - is our expectation that the novel will produce a ... model of the social world.

(189)

In *Remember Me* the meals are carefully described (Lily's dinner ranges from 'cold consommé, topped by lump-fish roe and whipped cream' to 'the Selfridge's cheese served with low-calorie crackers' [63]), as are the shrewdly collected antiques and their purchase prices. This information is not offered innocently but amounts to carefully accumulated evidence of the human pretension, materialism and vanity implied in Madeleine's warning from the grave: 'Oh my sisters ... and my brothers

too, soon you will be dead. Is this the way you want to live?' (223). Heartless materialism and greed are not overtly located in the male characters, but find their manifestation in Lily, who sees Madeleine's death as an opportunity for calculations. The twenty pounds a week that Madeleine cost them can now be spent on a new roof and recarpeting.

Weldon's method in *Remember Me* is reminiscent of the New Journalism of the 1960s. Tom Wolfe describes one of the chief devices of this school of writing:

This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene. Symbolic of what? Symbolic, generally, of people's *status life*, using that term in the broad sense of the entire pattern of behaviour and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be.

(*The New Journalism*, 1973:47)

The innovation defined by Wolfe and practised by the new journalists is in fact an exaggerated version of a time-honoured tradition among fiction writers. All realist narrative is characterised by an essential superfluity, what Culler terms 'descriptive residue' (1975:193). The writer of realist fiction reproduces a recognisable world by delineating objects or conversations which have no other function than to be there, signifying reality. Weldon generates descriptive residue in such excessive quantities that she creates a burlesque of realism. Some might contend that mere residue is inflated to the proportions of debris.

Weldon's mockery of the 'real' is accompanied by a concomitant validation of the supernatural. As a strategy, however, Weldon's use of unearthly elements has been met with critical reservations. Reviewing *Remember Me*, Neil Hepburn complains that 'the supernaturalism is a cop-out, the mark of unwillingness, or worse, to try to make real sense of the fresh wounds and old scars collected in those dangerous games' (1976:486). The key issue here is, of course, 'real sense', and whether the problems faced by a woman like Madeleine can be solved rationally. In

this regard, Krouse's account of Weldon's use of the supernatural in the novel seems to me well-founded:

Supernatural elements are used to underline the power of women's resentment against injustice ... . The supernatural elements are appropriate since the resentment felt by women is powerful and authentic, yet not always scrupulously fair or rational.

(1978:16-17)

I would go a step further and argue that Weldon's narrative strategies (privileging the weird over the recognised, contravening the usual sequence through unusual paragraph breaks and code-switching) form part of a broader offensive against those good/bad binary oppositions which have subjugated the female sex.

\* \* \*

The three novels under discussion here are approximately contemporary with Sherry Ortner's essay, 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?' (1974), Hélène Cixous's *La Jeune Née* (1975) and Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976). These texts offer incisive analyses of the complementary fear and denigration of women which permeates the majority of societies, and posit that female subjugation is a feature of a larger nature/culture dichotomy.<sup>10</sup>

Ortner argues that the chief aim of culture is transcendence over nature. Since women are associated with nature, they are locked into an artificial set of contrasts through which they are ineluctably related to uncontrollable, primitive, feral and supernatural forces. Like Cixous, Weldon sets about showing how this subjugated position can be turned to advantage. In all three books - *Remember Me*, *Little Sisters*, and *Praxis* - we find women who use their own marginality to exercise power over people and their environment. Madeleine haunts; Praxis prostitutes herself and murders; Gemma kidnaps. Weldon allows Madeleine a power in death that far surpasses any she had in life, and the admiration of the mortuary attendants confers upon the usurped wife a satisfyingly immortal sexual attraction.

Madeleine, the poor, spurned first wife eking out an existence in a basement flat with her fat daughter, becomes a potent force when dead. Where once she was reduced to making abusive phone calls to her usurper, as a ghost Madeleine not only stops clocks and causes icy blasts, but reorganizes relationships to her satisfaction. In particular, she ensures that Hilary will not be adopted by her successor, Lily.

If it is the body that relegates women to a perpetual second place and a helpless passivity, then in this novel Weldon simply and wickedly removes the body and sets the terrible spirit free. She exploits the female identity crisis as poetically rendered by Cixous:

*Who*

Invisible, foreign, secret, hidden, mysterious, black, forbidden

*Am I ...*

Is this me, this no-body that is dressed up, wrapped in veils, carefully kept distant, pushed to the side of History and change, nullified, kept out of the way, on the edge of the stage, on the kitchen side, the bedside?

*For you?*

(1975:69)

Madeleine seems to echo just such a quandary. She is indeed 'invisible, foreign, secret, hidden, mysterious, black, forbidden'; the irony is that Weldon replaces the subordination implied by each of these epithets with insubordination. Madeleine has been 'nullified' (by a fatal accident) but, through Weldon's introduction of the supernatural, she is not 'kept out of the way'. In fact, Lily resents Madeleine's posthumous presence more than she resented the living Madeleine. Madeleine the ex-wife is demonized, but it is in death that she discovers the power of being demonic.

In her study of this phenomenon in Victorian literature, *Woman and the Demon* (1982), Nina Auerbach asserts that 'woman is not frailer than man is, but stronger and more powerful; her nature is broadly demonic rather than fallibly human' (108). Jarvis's drunken curse, with its richly demonic imagery seems to bear this out. It is not merely the lament of a hen-pecked male; it is an admission of a far more fundamental state of affairs:

JARVIS: A toast! I offer a toast. Death and damnation to all ex-wives. Down with the leeches, the succubi, the old women of the world who suck men's blood, destroy their life force, make them old before their time - (and he sings) 'Beauty is only skin-deep, but ugliness goes to the bone, the bone-'

(80-81)

Esther Harding, in *Women's Mysteries* (1955) sees such male paranoia as the effect of an unconscious battle for power:

The ambivalent and potent character of the feminine principle is an ever-present psychological reality to men. To them women, seemingly, partake of its daemonic power, though many men are unaware of this fact. But the almost universal fear that men have of falling under the power or fascination of a woman and the attraction that this same bondage has for them are evidences that the effect a woman produces on a man is not infrequently daemonic in character. The depreciatory attitude which many a man takes towards women is an unconscious attempt to control a situation in which he feels himself at a disadvantage ...

(34)

The ambivalence Harding refers to stems from the angel/witch dichotomy which inevitably results from the attribution of divinity to motherhood or virginity on the one hand, and the aversion to nature's disorder as reflected in woman's biological functions on the other. Yet, as Ortner points out, this apparent complicity with natural forces of disorder is tempered by the fact that women are responsible for the acculturation of children:

Thus we can account easily for both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddess, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice, and the strong presence of feminine symbolism in the realms of art, religion, ritual, and law).

(1974:86)

Duality is clearly reflected in the treatment of womanhood in *Remember Me*. Lily is, apparently, representative of angelic womanhood (in contrast to Madeleine, the demon-witch). Her name itself is suggestive of purity and innocence. She provides freshly-squeezed orange juice in chilled glasses, filter coffee and free-range eggs on a perfectly laid breakfast table. Nevertheless, hints of another side to Lily begin to emerge, for she has 'the crude regular beauty of some painted angel' (9). Her status as an imposter is confirmed when the narrator reveals that, concealed from view by her silver dress, 'Lily bleeds, yes she does. Red drops of death and birth, like anyone else' (63). Her 'angel' face is only one aspect of Lily: she is as subject to the 'polluting' force of nature as the demented Madeleine. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1969), summarizes the benefits to the male of the identification of woman with nature and the body:

Patriarchal religion and ethics tend to lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma it attaches to sex were the fault of the female alone. Thereby sex, which is known to be unclean, sinful, and debilitating, pertains to the female, and the male identity is preserved as a human, rather than a sexual one.

(51-2)

Dinnerstein has described man's 'magic feelings of awe and fear, sometimes disgust ... toward all things that are mysterious, powerful, and not himself, and that woman's fertile body is the quintessential incarnation of this realm of things' (1976: 125). As if consciously desecrating such taboos, Weldon unleashes that body into her texts in the form of women who menstruate, conceive, abort or deliver. And, just for good measure, Madeleine, Gemma and Praxis have occult connections which provide ominous confirmation of the danger associated with women.

This dread of what Dinnerstein has termed 'the dirty goddess' is apparently contagious. Women's obsession with the inadequacies of their bodies is a neurosis carefully nurtured by men like Jarvis, connoisseur of nipples, and Sam, who 'has a generalised horror of pregnant women; of stretch marks on bellies, of figures lost beyond redemption' (144). *Remember Me* charts female self-disgust and links it to a

male disgust and anxiety which originate in the association of reproductive capability with chaos:

Jarvis, last of the English gentlemen, revering women yet fearing them, flying to the bottle for comfort, consolation, to fan the tiny female spark of creativity to flame: finding there the strength to insult, combat, and defy the female principle in its crude and cuntish form. Jarvis, born of woman, fashioned by man, yearning yet despising: full of talent on a good day, full of rubbish on a bad: terrified of stridency, of the raising of a female voice and yet embracing it: showing your love in bed but seldom out of it.

(121)

The inauguration of womanhood, marked by the onset of menstruation (a favourite Weldonian theme) is the moment at which this division between reverence and dismay occurs. At the end of 'Weekend',<sup>11</sup> for example, a mother weeps inconsolably at the prospect of her daughter's entrée into her own cycle of suffering. In *Remember Me*, Margot's daughter, Lettice, experiences this initiation with feelings of revulsion that are relevant to a consideration of the nature/culture divide:

Her instinct is to call her mother for help - 'Mother, come quickly! See, I am hurt, wounded, ill in some dreadful way.' But the truth of the matter is soon apparent to Lettice: she is menstruating for the first time, as to all accounts was only to be expected. A dreadful gloom falls upon her: she has the vision of a life to come which is womb-centred, messy, uncontrollable; a whole future of pregnancies and miscarriages, cysts, fibroids, erosions, V.D., breasts swollen with milk, riddled with cancer, the sorry women sitting in her father's surgery. She is at the end of her neat, self-controlled pre-puberty prime.

(104)

Lettice's fear that she is sick and her mental depression at the thought of being prey to the unpredictable, uncontrollable forces of nature are significant. Her reaction is the prelude to that debilitating self-hatred and denigration exemplified in her mother's reluctance to engage in a lesbian relationship, since 'if her own body is so forbidden, always was, to touch, to see, to know - how much more forbidden must another woman's be?' (185). Madeleine is thus prepared to go out with any man (and meets her death doing so) rather than consort with her own sex.

\* \* \*

Repelled by themselves, women collude with men in their own subjugation. This is not simply a battle between the sexes, but a fight against primeval forces.

Dinnerstein argues that men are threatened by the chaotic products of biology and the psyche, and that they consequently seek to restrain nature in the form of woman:

Alien, dangerous nature, conveniently concentrated near at hand in woman's flesh, can be controlled through ritual segregation, confinement, and avoidance; it can be subdued through conventionalized humiliation and punishment; it can be honored and placated through ceremonial gifts and adornments, through formalized gestures of respect and protectiveness.

(1976:125)

Almost every one of these strategies can be seen at work in *Praxis*: Lucy is restrained in an asylum, and Praxis is incarcerated; in her marriage to Ivor, Praxis is 'rewarded' with comfortable furnishings and cosmetic indulgences; the Reverend Allbright will not sleep with his wife, 'his holy Madonna' (120), after her first child has been born. Madeleine and Praxis wield power when they are outsiders, beyond the restraining influence of matrimony, and no longer susceptible to the allure of romance (Praxis because she is a feminist, Madeleine because she is dead).

Fay Weldon frequently selects the rejected first wife for special attention and the mythical associations of this figure of the discard are worth exploring. In the characterization of both Praxis and Madeleine there are echoes of Lilith, 'traditionally the first wife of Adam; the queen of the demons and sometimes wife of the devil' (Leach, 1972:622), who refused to submit to her husband, angrily uttered God's name, and who was thus locked into a cycle of revenge (she killed babies), and punishment (her own babies were killed). Lilith's profaning of the Father is reflected in Praxis's knowing incest; the revenge on patriarchy wreaked by Eve's predecessor is suggested in Praxis's smothering of Mary's mongoloid son, an act which she believes will free the mother to pursue her lifelong dream. Gemma, in *Little Sisters*, is also 'the childless, envious, fatal demon woman' (Leach, 1972:622) that the Lilith myth inscribes, and Madeleine in *Remember Me* possesses Lilith's supernatural power.

In *Praxis*, Lucy Duveen's dementia clearly stems from her conviction of female pollution and corruption: her own, Judith's, Praxis's. She is, ironically, institutionalized for having absorbed the dictum of women's guilt too completely. She passes her knowledge on to her daughter, who sees life within the rigid terms of merit and demerit marks, where you are 'three points up for being a male' (54). The special treatment Weldon accords madness in *Praxis* is important, since madness is yet another of the evils associated with women. In her study, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987), Elaine Showalter explores the 'pervasive cultural association of women and madness'. She points out how the 'statistical overrepresentation of women among the mentally ill' has been ascribed to 'their social situation, both their confining roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their mis-treatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynistic psychiatric profession'. Showalter also cites 'our dualistic systems of language and representation, [where women] are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind' (3-4).

\* \* \*

No wonder that the mature Praxis calls on her sisters to 'fight nature tooth and claw', and warns that 'Nature our Friend is an argument used, quite understandably, by men' (147). This is how Chapter 17, entirely devoted to 'Arguments from nature', concludes. Here, towards the end of the novel, Praxis Duveen removes the layers of truth, half-truth and untruth from our conditioned understanding of what is natural. Beginning with 'It is natural, they told me in prison, waving their keys, to want to be free', she progresses to the less plausible, 'It is natural ... to miss the opposite sex', and to the frankly improbable, 'It is nature ... that makes us get married'. The litany of falsehoods culminates in the absurdity of 'It's nature that makes us love our

children, clean our houses, gives us a thrill of pleasure when we please the home-coming male'.

Weldon not only interrogates, in *Praxis*, all the spurious truths that (mis)inform society: she also subverts 'natural' narrative expectations. An episodic novel about an eponymous protagonist, covering her life from childhood to maturity, 'naturally' raises readers' hopes. Here, surely, is a novel of development, satisfying our desire for an account of moral progress. A summary of *Praxis* gives the lie to such intimations.

*Praxis*' early troubles include the shadow of her illegitimacy (her father abandons her mother for a barmaid), adolescence (when her first menstrual period is explained by her sister, Hypatia, as 'God's punishment' [39]), and her mother's accusations of deviancy. Having read *Praxis*'s private diary entries, revealing her crush on another girl, Lucy summons an elderly policeman to witness her denunciation:

Little Jewess, after all. Sly little lesbian. Little slut. Filthy, dirty little piece of slime. Little bastard. (45)

Unhappy beginnings may bode well for a novel of development; but instead of directing the action away from suffering and denigration, Weldon's narrator steers *Praxis* into a series of life choices that vindicate her demented mother's labels. This may be because the impetus behind the author's conception of *Praxis* is the arbitrary nature of signifiers, particularly those words which 'define' women. Olga Kenyon recorded Fay Weldon's remarks during a talk and interview at Morley College on 5 February 1985:

I went through all the bad words women are called and made her these: whore, adulteress, murderess, incestuous, thief, lecher. And she is all these things, but I go through them one by one to explain why these portmanteau words cannot really be applied to women.

(Kenyon, 1988:115)

When her mother is committed to an asylum, *Praxis* goes to live with her English teacher, Miss Leonard, who, despite her profession, is hardly a moral

exemplar. By conjuring the fantastic image of this respectable spinster soliciting, Weldon conflates the either/or dichotomy which divides good women from bad and makes the sex as a whole comprehensible. The prim schoolmistress turned streetwalker falls pregnant and is refused an abortion (she is told to accept pregnancy as her 'punishment' [76]). A trenchant point about morality and 'culture' emerges here. The incident is set in the midst of World War II and Miss Leonard observes, 'It seems extraordinary to me that in a world in which men are killing each other by the million, they should strike such attitudes about an unborn foetus' (76). The distortion inherent within the male ethic which disallows abortion but allows war is graphically illustrated when Miss Leonard, largely pregnant, is killed by a stray buzz bomb. Her baby miraculously survives. Praxis eventually adopts Mary, taking a lifelong (and ultimately self-destructive) interest in the girl's welfare.

Having survived childhood traumas, Praxis is accepted to do a course in political science and economics at Reading. However, this is only because the University cannot identify her sex from her name: if Praxis proceeds it is by error only. She now enters that phase of her life which can best be described as 'trial by Willy'. After her first university dance, an inebriated Praxis stands passively while Phillip and Willy remove her dress and examine her: "You take your hands off her," said Willy. "She's an object lesson, not a body" (91). Throughout this scene, during which the two boys squabble over their sexual prize, Praxis is referred to in the third person, thus completing her objectification.

In a duplication of Chloe's experience in *Female Friends*, Praxis sacrifices her chances of academic success in order to provide the 'sex, comfort, company and secretarial services' (100) Willy requires, and which she fears he can acquire in return for a small investment of gin and lime at the students' bar should she prove unsatisfactory. Praxis is capable of an A, and even now - as she deliberately underperforms to protect Willy's ego - 'occasionally when she forgot, she got a B' (111). Her tutor ascribes her performance to the inherently defective nature of the female:

The earlier A had been a flash in the pan, her tutor could only suppose. One of the tantalising little flashes girls in higher education would occasionally display: for the most part flickering dimly and then going out, extinguished by the domestic nature of the female sex, altogether quenched by the desire to serve the male.

(100-101)

Praxis loses all volition as she succumbs to Willy's assessment of her as 'a born housewife' (111). He tightens his hold on her by insisting that they move into her old Brighton home with all its associations of guilt and self-disgust. He discourages her in her ambitions: 'You wouldn't get to first base', he warns her when she expresses interest in an exchange programme, 'they're not interested in housewives' (112). He denigrates her abilities, implying that the only job she is good for is nurturing others, and traps her completely by insisting that they adopt the baby Mary. When Praxis demurs, Willy retorts, 'You have your instincts, surely' (121).

Praxis is not allowed to object or even to ask for respite in the form of a holiday, 'Your life is one long holiday' (123), complains Willy. To compound her humiliation, he now makes her liable for her failure to complete her degree. Increasingly, the slave becomes dissatisfied with her lot; she is aware that she requires more, but is unable to articulate her desires:

'What else do you want from life, Praxis, apart from what you've got?'

What, indeed. A man, a house, a child. It was what most women wanted.

(125)

Given her domestic subjugation, Praxis' decision to take up prostitution brings deliverance. This venture - in which she is accompanied by Elaine, a shop assistant - is guided by the words of her varsity chum:

'The only way out,' Irma had said, 'is to sleep your way out.'

So they did.

(131)

Yet more apparently counter-developmental events follow. Her father arrives one day at 'Raffles Esplanade Dive' where Praxis plies her trade, and 'the event occurred: the extraordinary happening, which divided her life in two: into before and after' (139). The notion of the 'sins of the father' is realized when Praxis, who recognizes her father for who he is but sleeps with him anyway, decides 'she would take his guilt upon herself' (144). Unwittingly paternal, Ben gives Praxis the courage to leave Brighton. His parting comment, 'So long as this is only part of your life, not all of it' (145), coupled with the fact that her prostitution has enabled her to save some money, has an immediate effect:

Pattie got up, washed, dressed, went home, packed, met Mary out of school, took a taxi to the station, the train to Waterloo, and within hours was knocking on Colleen's front door. (145)

In London, Praxis undergoes a mock redemption. She dyes her hair blonde, gets herself a job and a husband, entering her marriage to the unnoteworthy Ivor in characteristically whimsical fashion, again on a suggestion from Irma. With blonde hair and Irma's cast-off clothing, Praxis is an imposter who cheerfully deceives not only the BBC (which happily employs this 'blonde, pretty, sensible' [172] receptionist), but middle-class suburbia as well. For in this guise, it is an easy step to the role of pampered wife:

Within three months Praxis was married and within four she was pregnant. Married to and pregnant by (there's posh for you, cried Irma, one and the same man and all!) the product manager of the soup mix firm, for whom she had worn, on Irma's instructions, a low-cut dress. (174)

Weldon gives the lie to the apparent wholesomeness of the nuclear family when, under the influence of a new couple, the entire housing estate indulges in a 'game' of wife-swapping. The suburban dream is exposed as a fraud:

Someone procured a vibrator from the States, which was raffled, and publicly used. Things began to go wrong. A wife killed herself with an overdose: someone started divorce proceedings: one of Diana's children ran away: Rory was convicted of a drunken driving charge: the parties stopped as suddenly as they had begun.

Praxis escapes from the estate and from Ivor by moving in to look after Phillip and his children while Irma has another baby. Almost immediately, Praxis betrays her friend's trust: she sleeps with Phillip while Irma is in labour. Although she appears to be wicked and callous, deserting her family and abusing a friend's trust, the accelerated pace of the narrative precludes moralistic reflection on the extraordinary deeds of Praxis the vagabond.

Now a successful copywriter, Praxis colludes with patriarchal powers by producing the slogans 'God made her a woman ... love made her a mother - with a little help from electricity!' (218) and 'A woman's satisfactions ... are husband, child, and home. And a new electric stove is one of her rewards' (223). Weldon cleverly juxtaposes these debasing, saccharine lines against the realities of Praxis's dual life as career woman and perfect wife. Challenged by Irma's women's group, Praxis mendaciously claims 'I believe that to be a wife and mother is the highest purpose of a woman' (254).

Her smugness does not last long, however, and when Philip's infidelity wears her out, Praxis finally seeks the comfort of other women. Significantly, Praxis's embrace of the Women's Liberation Movement is described in terms of divestiture and rebirth. Her conversion to feminism - or in Miss Leonard's terminology, from herbivore to carnivore - is gradual.<sup>12</sup> She sees Irma's friends as 'the women without men: the rejects' (235). However, when she first joins the liberation movement:

She saw it as a religious experience: she stood divested of the trappings of the past, naked (with a body no longer proud and beautiful) humble before a new altar, in the knowledge of the Daughter of God, reborn.

Wherever she went she saw women betrayed, exploited and oppressed. She saw that women were the cleaners, the fetchers, the carriers, the humble of the earth, and that they were truly blessed.

Religious fervour and biblical phrasing replace conventional expectations of character development with the notion of conversion and renaissance.

At last, thinks the reader, Praxis has reached the end of her trials. But the narrator has one final disappointment in store. In an act of misguided martyrdom, Praxis smothers Mary's Down's Syndrome baby. Weldon expands on this:

You could say that Praxis' smothering of the mongoloid baby is the turning-point, it's the culmination of everything these women have gone through in our society. Praxis wanted to liberate her step-daughter Mary, who otherwise would be put into a lifetime's servitude by her loving female nature. *Praxis* is a fictionalised working-out of all the meanings of that word, through the trends in our society, which make women victims.

(Kenyon, 1988:114)

The euthanasia Praxis perpetrates does indeed represent a very important turning-point, for in this simple and openly confessed reversal of fortune, she repudiates the inheritance of nature and is transformed from passive object to active subject. Praxis insists on accepting responsibility for her deed. In refusing to allow a sympathetic doctor to maintain the cause of death as 'natural', she initiates a massive clash with the legal system and with society in general.<sup>13</sup> She does this in the name of feminism and helping other women; yet ironically, Mary 'turned her back on Praxis and cried' (272). Praxis has sought to help a woman whom she loves dearly, but alienates her in the process. Nevertheless, Mary does not go into a decline, she does go to Toronto, and she does pursue her career. The important achievement is that amidst all this misplaced heroism and unquantifiable suffering, stasis has been broken.

This is significant because throughout *Praxis* female characters frequently give voice to their frustration at how life does not progress:

'No matter where you go ... or however hard you try, you end up where you began.'

(130)

'It can't go on,' she said to Praxis.

'You'd be surprised,' said Praxis, 'how it can. Or what it takes to make it stop.' (154)

It can't, as I used to say (usually wrongly) go on! (230)

The ending of Mary's son's life is a direct response to such traps that arrest feminine aspirations. Mary is released from a responsibility that would have truncated her career hopes, and, though Praxis is imprisoned, she has ensured that - in at least one instance - things do not go on. The name 'Praxis', defined in the novel as 'turning-point, culmination, action; orgasm' (9), is thus explicitly antithetical to stasis. The concept of practice which inheres in her name is exemplified in Praxis herself, who enacts almost the entire spectrum of womanhood.<sup>14</sup>

In *Praxis* Weldon burlesques plot itself, using her character's illogical escapades and irreconcilable incarnations to insist that all negative connotations associated with women and their activities inhere in language and not in fact:<sup>15</sup>

What was she, after all? A whore. But titles were absurd, definitions were absurd; she'd always known that: words used to simplify relationships between one person and another: granting one privilege, the other disadvantage. Bastard, Jew, student, wife, mother, prostitute, murderer: all made assumptions that reduced the individual, rather than defined them.

(142)

Praxis explodes the stereotypes of both mother and whore. She abandons not only her stepdaughter Mary, but also her own biological children; by smothering Mary's mongoloid baby she also kills her own grandchild. By contrast, she finds that prostitution 'is a way out, not a path down', and wonders why it should seem so much worse a fate than to be 'the ordinary domestic woman, lumbering about in the hospital maternity ward' (164). As if in response to the process of acculturation which dictates how women see themselves, Weldon invents characters who fly in the face of stereotypes: Miss Leonard, the soliciting spinster; Hilda, the industrial negotiator who plays strip poker; Irma the manicured lady of leisure turned activist.

Moreover, her narrative strategy in *Praxis* subverts one of the novel's most tried and tested forms: *Bildung*.

The novel of development may be ideologically at odds with female liberation: at the heart of it lies the idea that the hero needs only education and experience to fit snugly and successfully into this best of all possible worlds. Elizabeth Abel, in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983), offers the following definition:

The genre embodies the Goethean model of organic growth: cumulative, gradual, total. Originating in the Idealist tradition of the Enlightenment, with its belief in human perfectibility and historical progress, this understanding of human growth assumes the possibility of individual achievement and social integration ... . Through careful nurturing, the hero should be brought to the point where he can accept a responsible role in a friendly social community. Clearly, successful *Bildung* requires the existence of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities, leading the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity. (5-6)

*Praxis* appears to follow the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, but turns out, on closer analysis, to be a clever feminist subversion of the genre traditionally associated with a central male protagonist. It is precisely the absence 'of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities' which Weldon exposes. In purely social terms, *Praxis* actually deteriorates in the course of the novel, pursued by the narrator's curse that concludes the first chapter: 'Lucy was of course unhappy ever after, and so was Hypatia, and *Praxis* too' (11).

*Praxis*'s advancement in life is conceived in terms of shedding rather than accretion. With each new metamorphosis, *Praxis* leaves behind mother, father, sister, lovers, husband, children, and with them, the multiple images of women these relationships entail. If *Praxis* simply jettisons the past, then she cannot be a product of it. Despite this, *Praxis* masquerades as a *Bildungsroman*, which knows 'development, becoming, a man's *gradual* formation' (Bakhtin:392). Even when she has killed Mary's baby in an apparently selfless act of liberation, heroism eludes

Praxis. Far from congratulating her 'deliverer', Mary rejects Praxis completely. When Praxis emerges from prison, she is forgotten and alone. Re-discovered by chance at the hospital where she goes to have her toe (which has been injured by a 'New Woman') seen to, Praxis becomes a reluctant heroine of the feminist cause. She endures rather than relishes 'the babel of people, mostly women, either embarrassingly servile, or self-consciously unimpressed' (282) who now flock about her.

Through the incident of father-daughter incest in particular, Weldon subverts the Freudian basis of the *Bildungsroman* according to which the son must pass beyond the Oedipal relation to his parents and achieve separation, autonomy and maturity. As we have seen, in her brief incarnation as a prostitute, Praxis has intercourse with her father. Unlike Oedipus, she knowingly has sexual relations with her parent. The kindly elderly gentleman (no evidence remains of his wife-beating past) gives Praxis paternal direction and she immediately finds the energy to break the stasis into which she has sunk, leaving for London and the next stage of her journey.

The question remains, however, whether (like Oedipus) she suffers ill-effects from her incest. Though Praxis experiences guilt at the time and is later dealt a series of blows by life (her beloved Phillip leaves her; she is imprisoned for murder), there is no obvious chain of cause and effect. Rather, by having sex with her father, Praxis destroys the symbolic power of patriarchy which rules by fear and prohibition. Her Oedipal injury (she has an injured toe; Oedipus was pierced in the feet as a child) is mended 'in a bed of sticky tape'. Unlike Oedipus, she cannot suffer a fall from grace since she has never been endowed with happiness. Hilda later reveals that she sent a letter to their father informing him of his daughter's activities at the Raffles Esplanade Dive, in which case he may have instigated the event himself. One of society's most ingrained taboos - incest - is disarmed in Praxis's reaction to this revelation: 'If [she] had contributed in any way to the richness of his memories, then she was glad' (260).

If it is not a *Bildungsroman*, what is *Praxis*? Bakhtin distinguishes between the novel of development and the novel of testing, or trial. Yet Praxis's trials do not make Weldon's novel an *Entwicklungsroman*, because there is no valour attached to passing tests based on the acquisition of 'a man, a house, a child'.<sup>16</sup> A further category in his discussion is the picaresque, where the central character (a rogue or vagabond who lives by his wits) is engaged in a series of episodic adventures. The apparent ease with which Praxis slips from one episode of her life to the next, and the bizarre nature of many of her adventures, do indeed make her something of a *picaro* or 'ingenious rogue' (Drabble, 1985:762). According to Bakhtin, this character 'stands beyond defense and accusation, beyond glorification or exposure ... knows neither repentance nor self-justification ... is not implicated in any norm ... and is not consistent' (408). Bakhtin's *picaro* is Fay Weldon's Everywoman whose near indefatigable ingenuity and perpetual praxis leave all labels behind, perhaps including the appellation 'feminist'.

\* \* \*

All Fay Weldon's novels treat feminist themes, but in *Praxis*, her problematizing of the issues, coupled with her dialectical narrative technique, confirms A.S.Byatt's description of it as 'the single best modern novel about the condition of women' (1979:10). Why, then, did it not win the 1979 Booker prize for which it was nominated? I would like to conclude this chapter by briefly placing *Praxis* in the context of contemporary women's fiction, specifically those novels which treat female life-histories. By so doing, I hope to show why the 1979 Booker decision may not have been justified.

*Praxis* belongs with a select group of novels, including Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) and Eva Figs' *The Seven Ages* (1986). These texts supplant traditional realist discourse with experiments in narrative disorganization, permitting a view of woman as perpetually itinerant and

incorrigibly 'other'. They are what Catherine Belsey terms 'interrogative' texts, in that they disrupt 'the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of enunciation' (91), and raise questions rather than supplying answers.

Instead of rewarding Weldon for (arguably) the first British contribution to this lively and anticanonical strain in contemporary women's writing, the prize went to Penelope Fitzgerald for *Offshore*. Set among a barge community on the Thames, Fitzgerald's novel also features poverty, single parenthood, an inadequate father, and extraordinary children who bring themselves up. But the novel has an undeniably happy, romantic ending: the wealthiest of the barge people (Richard, of the suitably noble 'Lord Jim'), evinces a caring, paternal interest in the struggling Nenna and her two daughters. Here is no destitute old woman nursing a sore toe and an uncertain future. *Offshore* admits that women, especially single women in leaky boats, need men. This thought may still have carried considerable charm in 1979, or it may have been felt that Fitzgerald's 'turn' had come.

Nearly ten years later, Penelope Lively won the Booker prize for *Moon Tiger* (1987). In many ways this novel follows the pattern set by *Praxis*. An old woman, now hospitalized, tells her story with the same free movement between third- and first-person. She shares Praxis's playful and spontaneous attitude toward herself and the discourse that frames her:

The question is, shall it or shall it not be linear history? I've always thought a kaleidoscopic view might be an interesting heresy. Shake the tube and see what comes out. Chronology irritates me. There is no chronology inside my head. I am composed of a myriad Claudias who spin and mix and part like sparks of sunlight on water. The pack of cards I carry around is forever shuffled and re-shuffled; there is no sequence, everything happens at once.

(2)

Lively's novel is powerful and deftly managed, but it cannot be denied that much of what seems striking and innovative here, had already been achieved in *Praxis*.

*Remember Me* and *Praxis* do not use innovation merely to dazzle; their technical finesse and thematic preference for the extraordinary form part of a broader

strategy of undermining what has always been considered normal and natural. Madeleine's supernatural revenge and Praxis's erasure of 'Nature's weak point. Nature's error' (272) are liberating devices. Through them, terms such as 'Nature' or 'illegitimacy' are reduced to the level of arbitrary nomenclature that lures one into the trap of glib definition. Both Madeleine and Praxis are forever in the process of transformation, differing always from the person they have just been and thus constantly deferring the question of who, exactly, they are. Weldon's propensity to play with genres ultimately becomes a way of eluding categorization altogether. In these novels, the self-appellation ('I am') implies multiplicity and a triumphant sense of *différance*.

## Endnotes

1. The motif of photography that runs through the novel acts as a commentary on the way women are 'captured' or defined by men. It is no coincidence that so many of the male characters in the novel are cameramen and image creators who perceive women as objects. Ben leaves Lucy for Hollywood; Lucy's lover is a Brighton beach photographer; Phillip makes commercials and films. An interesting sidelight on Fay Weldon's relationship with photography: the 1995 Thames & Hudson catalogue announces a book of David Bailey's photographs entitled *The Lady is a Tramp*, with text by Weldon.
2. Weldon subverts this logic of origins in *Puffball*, a novel which pursues origins even to the moment of conception.
3. My reading of Fay Weldon's anti-authoritarian narrative technique draws on Derridean notions of presence, absence and difference, as well as his distinction between speech (spuriously associated with presence) and writing (associated with absence). Jacques Derrida reverses the traditional philosophical belief that speech is always anterior (and therefore superior) to writing, or that indeed there is meaning prior to expression:
 

To write is to know that what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place, does not await us as prescription in some ... divine understanding. Meaning must always await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning. ...It is because writing is *inaugural* ... that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future. (1978:11)
4. In the case of Derrida's *Marges de la philosophie* (1972), I am using Culler's translation of selected extracts.
5. These quotations are both taken from Olga Kenyon's interview with Fay Weldon, in Kenyon's book, *Writers Talk* (1989:190-201).

6. In her book, *The Writing or the Sex? or why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good* (1989), Dale Spender shows that men regularly overestimate the percentage of any conversation dominated by women, and underestimate their own contributions.
7. Ironically, these 'illicit' works convey a trenchant moral. On more than one occasion Weldon has referred to the moral impetus of her fiction. 'Are you conscious of writing literature with intent?', John Haffenden asked Fay Weldon in 1985, to which she replied, 'Literature with intent to reform? I think so, yes' (308).

She is also quoted as saying (in an unconscious echo of Matthew Arnold):

Now that we have no philosophers and no priests, nobody we  
listen to, we leave it to the writer to provide a direction and a  
purpose and a meaning to life. (*Fair Lady*, 1987:77)

8. The *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (ed. Leach, 1972) does not have separate entries on the Sphinx or the Medusa. These figures must be looked up under the name of the male hero - Oedipus or Perseus - who encountered them. An ongoing feminist project is the rewriting of these myths from the woman's point of view.
9. Two useful books which relate narrative experimentation to feminism are Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985) and S.P.Martin's *Open Form and Feminine Imagination* (1988).
10. I am not trying to suggest that Weldon read any of these texts, rather I suspect that much esoteric theory filters its way down fairly rapidly into the popular sphere.
11. In *Watching Me, Watching You* (1981).
12. 'Carnivores feed off herbivores,' said Miss Leonard. 'Carnivores exist to herbivores in a ratio of fifty to one. I am a herbivore. We munch away peacefully, looking wise, until suddenly snap, snap, we're gone.'  
(71)
13. Even the prostitute and the shoplifter with whom Praxis shares a cell adopt a tone of moral outrage when discussing her offence.
14. Praxis, or practice, is especially important for feminist literary theory. Feminists cannot allow themselves the luxury of trusting that mere theorizing will eventually result in fairer practice. While deconstruction, for example, may *theoretically* open spaces or allow for a fresh interpretation of justice in the future, feminist critics are left with the problems of *now*:

how to resolve conflict among competing voices; how to assure that everyone has a chance to speak; how to ensure that each voice counts equally; how to assess whether equality or participation is necessary in all cases or in which cases; how to effect a transition from the present in which many voices cannot speak, are necessarily excluded ... how to instill and guarantee a preference for speaking over the use of force; and how to compensate for the political consequences of an unequal distribution and control of resources.

(Flax, 1990: 233)

Weldon's protagonist, and the bearer of this auspicious name, may be seen to some extent to be an embodiment of such questions of praxis.

15. Weldon here sounds uncannily like a structuralist, although - unlike her contemporaries A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble - she is not in a position to refer to current literary theory self-consciously. She is unlikely to have read the ideas of Barthes or Saussure concerning *langue* and *parole*, but I would reiterate my point that there is a process by which such theories are assimilated into popular culture and may be absorbed subconsciously.
16. The *Entwicklungsroman* is, according to Bakhtin, 'the novel of trial' (393).

## Chapter Three

*Puffball* (1980)

*The President's Child* (1982)

*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983)

By Saturday morning the fine hairs of the blastocyst inside Liffey had digested and eroded enough of the uterus wall to enable it to burrow snugly into the endometrium and there open up another maternal blood vessel, the better to obtain the oxygen and nutrients it increasingly required.

(PB:121)

If he was a girl, she thought, I would not do this. I would be more practical, less reverent. I would see a daughter as an off-shoot of me. I would be less prepared to sacrifice myself.

(PC: 213)

He had made her as a mother makes a child: to be its own self, not hers. And as in any child successfully reared, it is indifferent to the parent.

(S-D: 225)

The intimate history of a pregnancy, suggesting that biology is destiny; a political thriller in which the heroine is prepared to sacrifice herself to save her son; an extravagant revenge fantasy involving cosmetic rebirth: these three novels would

seem to have little in common with one another and still less with feminism. What could Fay Weldon - subversive woman writer *par excellence* - have been thinking of? To answer this question rather alarmingly: the 'problem' is psychosomatic. Weldon frankly inscribes in her fictions the multiple contradictions of being a woman, and moreover, a woman writing. This authorial self-consciousness tempts me to apply to Weldon's fictions under consideration here a lightly ironic version of Lacan's theory of narcissism.<sup>1</sup> Given Weldon's self-reflexiveness, a discussion of *Puffball*, *The President's Child* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* drawing on the theoretical, narrative and thematic implications of mirroring and mothering seems appropriate. This chapter will, therefore, consider the fact of sexual difference (namely Weldon's motherhood) in relation to fictions of sexual difference (namely Weldon's novels on motherhood). In contrast to the apparent thrust of Foucault's question, 'What difference does it make who is speaking?' (1986:120), it will be found to matter a great deal.

As a writer, and frequent commentator on her own writing, Weldon seldom allows us to lose sight of the fact that she is a woman - a bearer of children, a spouse, a female friend, a daughter - and that this fact matters. For feminists, indeed, the stigma attached to gender definition of authors has largely disappeared:

Traditionally, of course, to emphasize the sex of a writer was to trivialize her work, to identify her as an authoress or a poetess rather than an author or a poet. Feminist critics have changed that tradition by co-opting the sexist of the past, through their redefinition of both the importance of gender awareness and the meaning of gender difference. In feminist criticism, gender difference no longer implies gender hierarchy; to be identified as a woman writer is not to be demeaned. Gender awareness is a positive feature of the creative and critical processes.

(Kitch, 1987:17)

My account of how the manifold contradictions in *Puffball*, *The President's Child* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* - while remaining contradictions - can be

reconciled with feminism depends upon an acknowledgement of Fay Weldon's gendered writing.

Olga Kenyon tells us that the final pages of *Praxis* were 'speeded up', as Weldon 'completed them in two weeks in hospital, waiting for her fourth child, afraid of possible death from a misplaced placenta' (1988:117). In *Puffball*, the novel which follows *Praxis*, the protagonist's pregnancy is endangered by a *placenta previae*. This novel is similarly linked to the author's doubly creative act of writing/childbearing. Weldon informed Kenyon that

*Puffball* was written soon after I became pregnant as it related to an actual experience. It was written deliberately fast because the feelings of being pregnant evaporate so quickly and the whole pattern of physical changes disappears months after you've had them. The novel was an attempt to nail them.

(1989:200)

These references to Weldon's interdependent motherhood/authorship immediately set up a chain of mirror images. Weldon (mother-to-be) writes her novel (text-to-be) in haste because her pregnancy (child-to-be) is in jeopardy. Later Weldon (now mother) loses no time in transferring this experience to a character (mother-to-be). The reflections do not end here. Weldon has stated that she assumes '[her] readers are all women' (Wandor, 1983:163). Therefore there exists a further potentially mirror-like correspondence between what she writes (and has experienced) and what her readers read (and may have experienced).

The three novels discussed in this chapter are all concerned with the act of engendering, whether it be a child (as in *Puffball* and *The President's Child*) or a monster (as in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*). But to examine these novels using a simplistic feminist thematics of motherhood leaves one with a series of unanswerable questions: Why is the character Liffey (*PB*) portrayed as subordinate to her own bodily processes and foetal passenger? Why does Isabel (*PC*) think that if her child had been a girl she would have acted differently? Why does Ruth (*S-D*)

employ her wonderfully subversive, devilish power to recreate herself in the image of a simpering blonde, a male fantasy?

Using the psychoanalytical model provided by Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage in infancy, I want to show how the mother becomes a figure for sublimated desire in the texts Weldon wrote in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, the questions posed above are not reflective of superficial, reactionary sentiment; instead they lead us into the recesses of the unconscious. In terms of the Freudian psychoanalysis opened up by Lacan, 'the (m)Other within is the dark-faced part of us all'.<sup>3</sup> But Lacan's theory can only be a starting point here. Certainly Weldon creates - in Mabs and Ruth particularly - some terrifying examples of motherhood, but her exaggeration of their wickedness and necromancy is ultimately parodic. And whereas Lacan perceives the effects of maternal separation - lack, discordance and insatiable desire - in entirely negative terms, Weldon's novels turn psychoses into high comedy. I will provide a brief overview of Lacan's theory, exploring the possibilities it presents for a reading of each of the novels before suggesting how, in each case, the novel exceeds his diagnostic guidelines.

A Lacanian reading allows us to perceive in Liffey a child-mother for whom separation has not yet occurred. Her pregnancy illustrates, with photographic accuracy, the cornerstone of Lacan's thinking, namely 'the specific prematurity of birth in man' (1977:4). Isabel's remark (in my epigraph) exemplifies the conferral of autonomy upon a child who bears both the appearance and the name of the father.<sup>4</sup> This autonomy, or ego, is illusory because, though it is possible to separate from the mother, Lacanian desire dictates that one hankers forever after the (m)Other. Ruth's cosmetic surgery becomes a trope for the insatiable desire to regain that moment of 'jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child' (2). 'The drama of primordial jealousy' (5) which marks the impossibility of any such quest is enacted through Ruth's monstrous vanity.

In Lacan's essay, 'The mirror as formative of the function of the I', he isolates the moment of self-identification (when an infant recognises itself in a

mirror) as a moment of *jouissance* to which the individual always harks back. Looking in the mirror, the baby sees himself as a coherent whole, despite 'his motor incapacity and nursing dependence'. The infant experiences a *Gestalt* which is 'in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him', and which 'symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination' (2). This experience initiates a lifelong quest to revive that early self-satisfaction, when the child enjoyed the sensation of imaginary wholeness provided by the 'Ideal-I'.

Feminist readings of Lacan remind us that the image the infant sees when it looks in the mirror is actually two people: its mother holding itself. In her essay on Lacan and feminism Ellie Ragland Sullivan draws attention to the effects of this illusion:

When the infant identifies with the human form - its (m)Other's and its own in a mirror - it has passed cognitively from 0 to 1. But by identifying a centre of unity outside itself, by taking an-Other to be itself, human perception of difference starts out based on a lie - on a disjunction or asymmetry - whose later effects range from the production of a double as in the *Doppelgänger* phenomenon, to a bodily disintegration such as that depicted by Hieronimus Bosch's figures.

(1991:217)

As a result of the mirror stage, the individual is perpetually inclined to reinvent itself as a single unified ego, but achieves only a series of mutations which emphasizes rather than eschews the inescapable human facts of *manque*, absence and incompleteness. These facts are further entrenched when the baby begins to learn a human language in which, inevitably, signifiers float tantalizingly out of reach. According to Lacan, 'we are forced ... to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (154). Ragland-Sullivan elaborates on what this entry into language entails for the child:

At around eighteen months two major changes occur. The child begins to use language somewhat coherently, and also becomes aware that the father's presence - or any other third person - is a prohibiting force to the infant's merger with the (m)Other. The infant begins to perceive its own separateness

from the (m)Other, only when forced to such awareness by what Lacan calls the phallic signifier or the paternal metaphor.... The phallic signifier of difference imposes a sense of limitations and 'self' -boundaries on a mirror-stage psychic illusion of symbiotic wholeness. At the same time the phallic signifier of introduces the possibility for reflective self representation through naming. Playing on the French words *non* and *nom*, Lacan says that the father's Name appears to mean 'no'. Language then works to reinforce the phallic injunction to differentiation by offering substitutive possibilities in compensation for the loss of natural spontaneity.

(214)

In Fay Weldon's *Puffball* all the players in Lacan's psychoanalytic drama (that is, mother, infant, father) are present. Furthermore, the tale that unfolds is one in which signifiers associated with the reproductive capacity of women are particularly elusive, and the chief protagonist's desire for the (m)Other is repressed. The signifiers I am referring to are the words 'puffball' (which denotes a fleshy type of vegetative matter, and connotes pregnancy) and 'nature' (which may or may not apply to the state of being a woman). As these signifiers imply, *Puffball* pursues female identity through the most obvious channel, that of biology, although it ultimately questions the contingency of womanhood and motherhood.

The novel traces the growing conflict between a couple, Richard and Liffey, following their move to an apparently idyllic country retreat in Somerset.<sup>5</sup> Richard still has to commute to London, and inevitably the distance, combined with his own weakness, result in his spending an increasing amount of time in the city, and with other women. The countryside is inhabited by rural 'folk'; the proprietors of Cadbury Farm, Mabs and Tucker, have their own agrarian idiosyncrasies which include Mabs's somewhat dangerous use of local plant life. Nature is most evident at work inside Liffey herself, and the novel's chief preoccupation is the process whereby Liffey's ovarian follicles ripen, an ovum drops into her fallopian tube, is fertilized, grows precariously into an embryo, and finally, in the denouement, makes its way into the world as an infant.

Weldon's parodic use of genre in *Puffball* (it is both a pastoral comedy and a novel of suspense) implicitly questions the value of all man-made categories of

identification. Here she imports the element of suspense from a traditionally 'male' genre into her almost exclusively gynocentric text.<sup>6</sup> The effect is to dramatize the events of pregnancy so that they are no longer explicable purely in terms of the 'natural', but are linked to ordinary social operations.

The ancient paternal fear that the baby may be another's forms the basis of the suspense plot. Liffey has slept with Tucker as well as with her husband Richard, and tension is created by the dramatic irony that lets the reader, but not the characters, into the truth of the baby's paternity. Mabs's climactic revelation of Liffey's infidelity, and Liffey's coincidental labour pains, produce some fine moments of suspense. Bleeding and abandoned on a remote farm road, her life and her baby's threatened by a *placenta previae*, Liffey is saved by the chance arrival of the local doctor who is in pursuit of another patient at Cadbury Farm. In this extraordinary combination of suspense and gynaecology, the 'natural' distinction between male and female texts is threatened, and in the process, the linguistic construction 'nature' comes under the spotlight.

The narrator of *Puffball* draws attention to the arbitrary connection between the signifier 'nature', and what is signified by that word, by cleverly placing the first letter on its side. We can no longer read 'nature' easily, but stumble over zature. Shifting the meaning of the word itself is less easy:

We no longer see Nature as blind, although she is. Her very name is imbued with a sense of purpose, as the name of God used to be. God means us. God wills us. God wants for us. We cannot turn words back: they mean what we want them to mean; and we are weak; if we cannot in all conscience speak of God we must speak of Nature. Wide-eyed, clear-eyed, purposeful Nature. Too late to abandon her. Let us seize the word, seize the day; lay the N on its side and call our blind mistress Zature.

(118)

In *Puffball*, nature 'signifies' anatomy and destiny, benign agricultural practices as well as malign herbal potions. Nature facilitates the action of the plot by providing an arena full of possibilities. As in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which this work occasionally echoes,<sup>7</sup> a couple's happiness is both jeopardized by,

and ultimately assured in, rural surrounds which permit the free play of mischievous supernatural forces. Not only is the action of *Puffball* presided over by Puck-like forces and set in a magical environment (beneath the gaze of Glastonbury Tor), but the name of Liffey's new neighbour, Mabs, is rich in supernatural associations.<sup>8</sup>

Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* offers the following gloss:

The "fairies' midwife" - i.e. employed by the fairies as midwife to deliver man's brain of dreams. (Evans, 1981:693)

As her name suggests, Mabs has a psychoanalytical function. Her malevolence comes to represent a hypostatized fear and loathing directed at women's fertility. Jealous of Liffey's pregnancy and suspicious of its paternity, Mabs draws on arcane knowledge inherited from her mother. She feeds Liffey with mistletoe, mushroom powder and an abortifacient in the form of ergot and tansy, and even makes a wax model of the expectant mother. Mabs maltreats her children - except when she is pregnant - and her inconsistent behaviour generally (she sends her husband to the lonely Liffey but later feels jealous of their intimacy) mark her as the '(m)Other within ... the dark-faced part of us all' (Lacan in Raglan-Sullivan, 1991:220). However, Mabs as a latterday witch, caster of spells and brewer of potions cannot really be taken seriously. She is a mischievous creation not just by virtue of her magic, for, by caricaturing the powerful mother figure in her otherwise clinically realistic text, Weldon undercuts all maternal myths.

The chief focus of the irrepressible Mabs's energies is the highly repressed Liffey. From the moment Liffey sees Honeycomb Cottage, its lintel festooned with red roses, 'a trap closed around her. ... It was a snare baited by Liffey's submerged desires and unrealised passions, triggered by nostalgia for lost happiness, and set off by fear of a changing future' (7). Liffey's repression (signalled by her 'submerged desires and unrealised passions') is reflected in the narrative technique of the novel. In almost every one of her other fictions, Weldon allows her female protagonists to voice their thoughts and aspirations in long first-person monologues. But Liffey never says 'I', except in dialogue, and even these occasions are rare since she spends

so much time in isolation. For Lacan, 'the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other' (58), and 'what I seek in speech is the response of the other' (86). Liffey's desires are left unspoken, and in many ways she appears to have denied the whole process of separation and maturation which initiates desire in the first place. For example, she remains extremely childlike in appearance and behaviour, suggesting that she still harks back to that early moment when the self perceived itself as whole and fused with the mother. This retrogression may stem from Liffey's unsatisfactory relationship with her mother, whose lack of maternal 'instinct' leaves her daughter at an arrested stage of development:

Liffey's mother Madge was a lean, hard-drinking, prematurely white-haired teacher of chemistry in a girl's school in East Anglia. She had never married, nor wished to, and Liffey was not so much a love child as a gesture of defiance to a straitlaced world. Madge had thought to bear a warrior son, but had given birth to Liffey instead, and Liffey had compounded the error by attempting, throughout her childhood, to chirrup and charm her way into Madge's affections.

(29)

Liffey's enchanted response to Honeycombe Cottage reflects her desire to return to a pre-oedipal state. But her hankering after country life is not shared by Richard, who asks 'What has nature got to do with us ... . We've left the cave. Too late to go back' (87). Richard's choice of metaphor is particularly relevant, since in Irigaray's re-reading of Lacan, 'the cave becomes the womb, the womb from which we seek consciously to escape and to which we struggle unconsciously to return' (Berg:9). For Liffey this struggle is to be frustrated by the conditions Richard sets down for her return. She may live in pastoral bliss only if she agrees to have a baby. However, Liffey's desire is clearly not for an infant, but for her own infancy.

A Lacanian reading of *Puffball* cannot take us much further than this. But there is another, more fascinating aspect to the novel, and that involves testing its commitment to - or negation of - feminist ideals. In the scene referred to above, Richard identifies Liffey with nature, informing his wife 'I want you to have babies and me to be their father and that's enough nature for me' (87). Is Liffey as close to

nature as her biology suggests to her husband? On several occasions in the novel, the narrator directs our attention to Liffey's ignorance concerning what is going on inside her womb, thus establishing a highly successful irony.<sup>9</sup> We are, for example, given the following details concerning Liffey's menstrual cycle:

Be that as it may, on the fourteenth day of Liffey's cycle, now nicely re-established at twenty-eight days, an ovum released by Liffey's left ovary, and swept up by the fimbriae, the little fingers of tissue where the fallopian tubes curl round to meet the ovary, swam into the healthy canal of the tube itself.  
(101)

Yet such intimate detail is immediately contrasted with the fact that 'Liffey knew nothing of all this'. As the narrator veers between the gynaecological story within Liffey and the more traditional narrative conflicts without, it becomes clear that the mind/body split is an integral part of Weldon's narrative strategy in *Puffball*.

Elizabeth Spelman's article, 'Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views' (1982) traces the mind/body distinction back to the very origins of the Western philosophical tradition. According to Platonic philosophy, 'the body, with its deceptive senses, keeps us from real knowledge; it rivets us in a world of material things which is far removed from the world of reality' (111). Plato's misogyny is reflected in his

...somatophobia: the body is seen as a source of all the undesirable traits a human being could have, and women's lives are spent manifesting those traits.  
(118)

Not surprisingly then, the argument against *Puffball* derives from the novel's identification of a woman with her body and its hormonal functions. The celebration of motherhood is seen as retrogressive.<sup>10</sup> The processes within Liffey are described in highly scientific terminology ('cervical canal', 'fimbriae', 'blastocyst'). This stylistic feature, coupled with the 'conversations' between mother and child ('The words were spoken in her head .... Liffey smiled, and felt herself close and curl, as a sunflower does at night, to protect and shelter' [139]), are seen to illustrate 'the extent to which her own body ... has been dissected: victimized, constructed, appropriated through the discourses of science and romance' (Waugh, 1989:195).

But Weldon does not foreground biology in an unambiguous manner, nor does she make the equation anatomy=destiny. Despite the narrator's early reference to nature's 'blindness', the sheer weight of the scientific terminology deployed to describe the activity of Liffey's womb voids the notion that Liffey is the victim of untameable forces of nature. Instead, Weldon's narrator imbues Liffey's gynaecology with intelligence and aptitude: 'The mechanics of her menstrual cycle were indeed ingenious' (23). Both the complexity of female biology and its beneficence are stressed:

The walls of Liffey's uterus were some half an inch thick, and composed of a whole network of muscles, some up and down, some oblique, some spiral, all extraordinarily flexible .... The blood supply, simple, ample and good, came from the main blood vessels in Liffey's pelvis; and the nerve supply, anything but simple, enabling as it did the muscle to contract rhythmically during menstruation and more dramatically during labour, would only send messages of discomfort when uncomfortably stretched. (100)

Passages such as this support Olga Kenyon's argument that Weldon 'dignifies female experience by incorporating scientific language to tell a wide public about the growing foetus and the hormonal effects on a woman's mind'. Kenyon asserts, 'never before has the struggle between reason and unreason, triggered by pregnancy, been so sympathetically and dramatically detailed' (1988:119).

Nevertheless, Kenyon's defensive tone (appealing for dignity and sympathy) actually serves to draw attention to the incipient somatophobia associated with the pregnant body. Liffey is reluctant to fall pregnant, perhaps fearing what de Beauvoir describes as 'the profound alienation when fertilization has occurred' (1953:57). De Beauvoir is eloquent on this point:

Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children who are proud of their young, straight bodies and makes young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument. (477)

The novel's title - *Puffball* - and its chief recurring image provide a focus for the alienating effect of pregnancy. Liffey's first encounter with a puffball fills her

with disgust, 'the smooth round swelling of the fungus made Liffey think of a belly swollen by pregnancy' (19). The power of this image to represent repugnance towards female fertility is confirmed when Tucker kicks the fungus, which bursts, setting off a corresponding pain in Liffey, 'so she knew it was her' (21). In the dinner party scene at the climax of the novel, Mabs serves up cooked puffball, and pointedly, 'as she cut through the flesh, not cleanly, but bruising and chipping on the way, she stared at Liffey's stomach' (241). The image thus signifies both Liffey's horror at her own fertility, and a more unspecified malevolence directed at pregnancy and parturition. The puffball, found growing wild, and associated with Mabs and Tucker, comes to stand for unpleasant folklore and ancient fears surrounding childbirth. Yet redemptive qualities are ultimately bestowed upon both science and nature. At the novel's conclusion, Liffey is physically saved by medical intervention in the form of a caesarian section; she is also emotionally assuaged by the warmth and light provided by puffballs burning in the grate. To some extent, Liffey's apparent reconciliation to maternity is a consciously achieved effect. The closing page of the novel is written in a markedly different style from the scientific discourse that precedes it.

*Puffball* ends with a scene reminiscent of the nativity: it is Christmastime and gathered harmoniously around a makeshift fire in humble surroundings are mother, father and newly-born infant. The latter claims 'them all, everyone, as bit-part players in his drama, dancers in his dance, singers to his tune' (272). Here Weldon could be accused of contributing to what Ann Rosalind Jones describes as 'the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries' (in Showalter, 1985: 369). And indeed in the final scene of *Puffball* Weldon produces an image worthy of a greeting card!

Weldon is of course aware that her choice of a biological theme in *Puffball* is not uncontroversial. In her interview with John Haffenden, she admits that the novel is devoted to a proposition I don't necessarily believe in, you see: it's an examination of the degree to which women are victims of their biology, good and bad. The proposition, that is to say, is that a woman has something in

her that she has to contend with. And having come to the end of that novel I was rather glad to realize how much I could disagree with what I began with. (1985:307)

In the context of feminism's longstanding attempt to distinguish between sex and gender, and given the sensitivity surrounding the identification of women with their maternal function, Anita Brookner's complaint is hardly surprising:

*Puffball* seems to establish pregnancy as the only experience a woman can rely on for authenticity or indeed for validation .... Superficially, it is a great leap backwards for the stereotype feminist. It argues in favour of the old myths of motherhood and universal harmony: a fantasy for the tired businesswoman.

(1980:202)

In addition, the novel's unswerving attention to foetal growth, its meticulous obstetric terminology, and the fact that the plot is contingent upon a medically difficult pregnancy requiring intervention, brings it into conflict with feminist attitudes to childbirth.

Ann Oakley complains in the preface to her book *Women Confined* (1980) that

It is from the 'scientific' representation of women as maternity cases that the character of mothers is deduced. 'Science' has hidden curricula of moral evaluations that masquerade as fact: it is these 'facts' that must be probed to expose the typical paradigms of women as reproducers that characterize the culture of the contemporary industrial world.

(5)

Oakley draws extensively on the work of birth expert Sheila Kitzinger, one of the major proponents of 'natural childbirth',<sup>11</sup> a method of parturition which *Puffball* actually satirizes. One of Liffey's London tenants, Lally, haemorrhages and her baby is still-born because she refuses a medically assisted birth. Weldon's use of gynaecological and obstetric terminology in her month-by-month account of Liffey's pregnancy potentially reduces the protagonist to the level of an interesting medical case.

The preposition 'inside' which heralds the monthly progress reports on Liffey's pregnancy - for example 'Inside Liffey (9)' - carries with it associations of privileged information. Just as newspaper headlines which promise the 'inside story' imply that the true, behind-the-scenes drama is about to be revealed, so Liffey's rather mundane existence is subordinated to the real theatre of life within her. This is the very view of motherhood which has recently been fervently attacked by feminist sociologists. In an article entitled 'The Body Invaded: Medical Surveillance of Women as Reproducers' (1989) Jennifer Terry analyses the implications of what can only be described as the rise of foetus power. Terry criticizes the 'new scientific panopticism' which advances in technology have made possible. Although she is referring to surveillance of pregnancies in the real world, the word 'panopticism' is a good one to describe Weldon's technique in *Puffball*. By establishing Liffey's baby as its mother's equal in narrative space, Weldon offers a representation of 'the autonomous fetus'. In Terry's view, such 'representations facilitate a legal and ethical rhetoric of the opposition between the rights of the fetus and those of the pregnant woman' (22).

Terry's argument fails at the precise point where fiction can succeed: the point of representation. Julia Kristeva reminds us in 'Motherhood According to Bellini' (1980), that a pregnancy cannot be properly described since it exists outside the realm of culture:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm .... And no one is present ... to signify what is going on.  
(237)

Paradoxically for an experience that stems from an alien (and alienating) presence, pregnancy is the ultimate absence. The disconnection between mother and foetus foregrounded in *Puffball*, illustrates the impossibility of true fusion with the mother. The mother, as adult, has access to language. The nature of the unborn infant's existence can only be relayed through a fictional approximation. Susan Squier in 'Fetal Voices: Speaking from the Margins Within' (1991) reiterates Kristeva's

assertion that motherhood, in its lived, non-symbolic aspects, is essentially unrepresentable, specifically because 'fetal experience is irrecoverable' (28).

Squier begins by asking a question about a contemporary tendency to 'speak for' the foetus:

How do we explain the cultural phenomenon the sign [warning pregnant women against alcohol] marks, however we construe its ideological implications: the growing presence of a hypostatized fetal voice, speaking to us from the margins within? (17)

She agrees with the view proclaimed by Terry that new techniques of ultrasound foetal monitoring and fiber optics are responsible for the appropriation of the unborn child by legal and moral authorities antagonistic to the mother. But Squier distinguishes between these foetal imitators and the foetal discourse inscribed in fiction:

... we can turn to literature to find an alternative representation of the fetus that is both more workable and more accurate: the concept of fetal/maternal relations as a border, a creative space of contestation, both linguistic and experimental. (18)

The kind of creative experiment Squier refers to is perfectly illustrated by a novel such as Bernice Rubens's *Spring Sonata* (1984), in which Buster's story of why he refuses to be born is discovered and recounted by an amazed doctor. In *Puffball* the narrator has recourse to a grand omniscience which allows her to speak eloquently for the foetus. This eloquence has the effect of reconciling the mind/body split and portraying the body as the source of a profoundly complex and mentally engaging drama.

*Puffball* is a brave (if futile) attempt, in Weldon's words, 'to nail down what it really feels like to be pregnant. And writing is a similar creative process' (Kenyon, 1988:119). This is exactly the kind of metaphor that fascinates Susan Stanford Friedman in 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse' (1987). Friedman maintains that there is a crucial difference between male and female use of childbirth as a point of literary comparison:

The different meaning of the female childbirth metaphor results from the way the reader alters the interaction of the incongruity and congruity in a woman's analogy. The metaphor's literal falsehood remains the same as it does in a male comparison. Babies are never books. But the reader's awareness that the metaphor features a woman changes how the biological and historical resonances work. First, the reader knows that the author has the biological capacity men lack to birth both books and babies. Second, the reader recognizes that the author's analogy defies the cultural prescription of separated creativities.

(58)

This is an illuminating statement. In *Puffball*, Weldon uses pregnancy as the basis of her plot, which reaches its climax in the birth process itself. By establishing a link between the creation of plot and the creative process of biology, Weldon reminds us not only of the need to inscribe female experience, but of the need for women to *be* scribes. Soon after she moves into her country retreat, Liffey makes a rather pathetic list of things to do:

Get telephone.  
Learn to drive.  
Organise shopping.  
Invite friends.  
Read gardening books.

Presently she added:  
Writing paper and stamps.

And then, later:  
Bicycle, to get to postbox. Powered bicycle, perhaps?

Later, she added:  
Write book.

That one frightened her. If there was time and opportunity she might actually have to, and be judged. She would rather have it as a dream, than a reality. She crossed it out. (68)

Liffey's tentative grasping at effective means of self-expression (transport, writing tools) fails at the ultimate test of communication and self-revelation, and 'write book' is erased. Time and opportunity are placed in the service of another type of

creativity, and by the end of *Puffball* Liffey has yet to achieve the motherhood she secretly desires.

\* \* \*

*The President's Child*, Fay Weldon's eighth novel, links genetics to a plot conceived in the thriller genre.<sup>12</sup> Its protagonist, Isabel Acre, though she has subsequently married another man, has a son by a prospective American presidential candidate. Dandy Ivel's appearance on British television creates suspense in the novel because of the obvious (and remarked upon) resemblance between him and Isabel's son, Jason. In addition to the vraisemblance *The President's Child* achieves through topical references to Concorde and to the true story of President Sukarno's mistress, 'accidentally' killed in Manila with her son, the novel contains a fascinating element of prophecy. Chance, a phenomenon Weldon thoroughly enjoys manipulating in her own fictions, has thrown up an extra-textual coincidence. For in this novel Weldon creates a fictional presidential candidate who exactly matches the aspirations of the American public:

The commentator, speaking over a crackly line, was speculating on the advantages of having youth at the American helm again, harking back to the Kennedy era, and Camelot, and the golden age of the USA, before national shame, depression, monetarist policies, inflation, unemployment and street riots became commonplace topics of conversation. The age before responsibility - the adolescence of a nation. Perhaps the USA could be young and vigorous again, with Dandy Ivel at the helm?

(29)

The American president elected ten years after the publication of *The President's Child*, Bill Clinton, shares Dandy Ivel's democratic affiliation, his charisma and youth (and tendency to sexual indiscretion). Furthermore, he carries the same promise of a return to a Golden Age.

Dandy Ivel, presidential hopeful, is plagued by past indiscretions, among them a brief affair with Isabel. From this union a child has been born, whose

existence threatens to undermine Ivel's political aspirations. The search for the (m)Other begins. Dandy Ivel's minders trace Isabel and Jason, planning to expunge her and the potential embarrassment she represents for their hero. They pursue her in the hopes of smoothing over a troublesome gap in Dandy Ivel's past (a Lacanian *manque*) which might prevent them from projecting him as a wholesome man of integrity. In *The President's Child*, the *nom-du-père* plays a crucial role. Dandy Ivel is literally only a name, since his appearances in the novel are limited to televised images, and his power (the law of the father) is exercised through CIA agents. Genetic inheritance has endowed Jason with all his father's features, and consequently a mirror image - which might lead to public recognition of Ivel's paternity - is the source of the conspiracy against Isabel. In the novel's denouement, Isabel (who, as a television personality, 'can't be relied upon to live anonymously' [209]) is instructed to commit suicide by walking into the traffic within full view of her child, who is sitting in a pavement cafe. In true thriller style, Isabel is released from this macabre obligation at the last minute. The CIA agents guarding Jason abruptly leave when they hear on the radio of Dandy Ivel's death. Jason, distraught at being left without money to pay the restaurant bill, hails his mother from the other side of the busy road. Isabel is guided safely through the traffic to meet her son.

The cornerstone of *The President's Child* is ego, and the aggression, pretence, and power-play to which it gives rise. For Lacan, ego is 'a function of mastery, a play of presence, of bearing, and of constituted rivalry' (307). Ego begins at that narcissistic moment of self-recognition in a mirror, an infatuation that 'discloses a libidinal dynamism' (2). In *The President's Child*, the libidinal drive which supports the shaky edifice of male ego is subjected to wicked mockery, from which not even the analyst, Dr Gregory, escapes.

Dandy Ivel suffers from impotence because he is still obsessed with Isabel (allegorically: career women castrate men). His entire campaign depends on his uprightness - unfortunately for him - both in terms of virility and of morals. Joe (Hot Potato) Murphy and Pete (Kitten) Sikorski, the two CIA agents after Isabel's

blood, dream of being able to announce the wedding of the president one day. Such an announcement 'would be like Prince Charles and Lady Di, and a second, a third, a fourth term inevitable' (175).<sup>13</sup>

In attempting to implement their grandiose scheme, the two clowns are hoist with their own petard. They dose Dandy with a mixture of Haloperidol and Lithium to tame his sexual mania. Dandy Ivel's death, at just the moment Isabel has been scheduled to die, is less of a coincidence than it seems, being the direct result of the tablets designed to suppress his libido. Male sexuality, and not female biology, is seen as rampant and doomed. The male plot backfires on itself, and Isabel lives on. In a witty allegorical twist, Weldon's narrator offers a new equation, namely that male anatomy= male destiny.

The phallus, so important in psychoanalysis, is deprived of its power when Dandy Ivel suffers first impotence and then death. In a final blow directed at psychoanalytic practice, Dr Gregory is exposed as a charlatan and a fraud, a mere CIA pawn. Thus in contrast to Lacan's thinking, *The President's Child* presents the narrative of a mother pursued by the phallus (Dandy Ivel: sex symbol, virile politician), not in pursuit of it. She is saved, wonderfully, by male bungling and the failure of male libido.

Psychoanalysis has in common with the thriller genre a search for the origin of problems and for solutions, and agents fare no better than analysts in *The President's Child*. In this mock-thriller, the secret agents do not rescue the damsel in distress: they are the cause of her suffering. The outrageous stupidity of the Secret Service is Isabel's salvation, and turns the novel into delectable satire on male formula fiction and its fantasies. Dandy Ivel's self-infatuation and his desperate need to maintain a presidential image, feed what Weldon terms the thriller 'skein' (Haffenden, 1985:122). To assure his political success, a series of undercover agents are sent out to monitor Isabel. Apart from Joe and Pete, Isabel's husband, Homer, and her psychologist, Dr Gregory, are also in the Secret Service. A chain of *mèconnaissances* (Lacan's term for misconstructions invented by the ego) are set in

motion, along with the false identifications and 'succession of phantasies' (4) which Lacanian psychoanalysis associates with the ego. In the course of the novel Isabel unravels two conspiracies: the plot against her as mother, and the plot against women in general insofar as they interfere with the narcissistic gaze of the male.<sup>14</sup>

Another psychoanalytical problem - and its cure - lies at the heart of *The President's Child*. The novel is partly narrated by Maia, who gathers her (mostly female) neighbours about her to hear Isabel's story, perhaps as a kind of moral fable. Maia is blind.<sup>15</sup> She loses her sight in an accident following an argument with her husband over his infidelity. Driven by her own emotions, Maia runs out into the traffic and subsequently loses her vision. She regains it only once she has told Isabel's story of triumph over men and their political machinations.

Maia's blindness may on one level cast her as a soothsayer like Tiresias, but on another, she has something to learn before she can be cured. In her discussion with John Haffenden of Maia's restored sight Weldon makes the point that Maia suffers from

an hysterical blindness, and she's cured when she comes to acknowledge it .... It dawned upon me when I was very young that you produce the physical symptoms which suit your psychic state. I remember working in an office with the most irritating woman I've ever known; she'd been married for three weeks and said, "it's very funny, but ever since the day my husband married me he's had a pain in his neck." So you may go blind because you won't see. But it's something you can carry too far, to uncharitable lengths.

(1985:309)

Weldon's tone here suggests that she might even concur with reviewer Harriet Waugh's complaint that 'the narrator is an intensely irritating creation' (1982:25). Maia's habit of intoning her observations, assisted by her chorus of female neighbours, suggests a dreary female impotence in the face of an incontrovertible fate.<sup>16</sup> The truth that eludes Maia, until she has recounted Isabel's tale of success, is that neither she nor her unhappy neighbours need accept a preordained destiny.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Maia runs into the traffic (spurred on by male deceit), Isabel makes it safely to the other side. The symmetry of these framing events provides us with a

cautionary tale in which the injunction, 'Careful as you cross the road' (178), acquires the status of an allegorical warning to women not to enter into complicity with men when their own lives are at stake. Despite her status as a career woman, Isabel's readiness to sacrifice herself for a male child rather than a female one ('I would see a daughter as an off-shoot of me' [213]) shows how she attaches greater value to the one who inherits the name of the father. For Isabel, the successful realisation of her own value puts her in touch with the elusive (m)Other, and her accompanying *jouissance*. Isabel sells her house and takes Jason to visit her mother in Australia:

Her Australian accent was back: she noticed it. She was down to the origins of her being. Flakes of good behaviour peeled away, like layers from a stale chocolate bar, held together by its wrapper. (205)

Both Isabel and Maia are ultimately healed through their interaction with male agents. However, the potency of the term 'agent' is undercut by Weldon's portrayal of the two CIA duffers, Joe and Pete. In the conclusion to his book, *Secret Agents in Fiction*, Sauerberg announces with a flourish:

In contrast to the modern novel formula fiction retains an idea of the protagonist as a truly heroic figure. In the fictional universes of ... the secret-agent story ... individual action which requires substantial personal resources always results in the hero's successful contribution to control of the situation. A fictional detective who is not able to pin down the culprit is a contradiction in terms, and so is a fictional agent whose action does not secure a state of international political status quo. (1984:101)

Weldon's agents are indeed 'contradiction[s] in terms'. They do not so much unravel the truth as get themselves completely tied up in knots. In any case, *The President's Child* adopts an ambivalent position on veracity: its chief narrator was literally blinded by the light of truth.

Maia is not the only narrator of *The President's Child*. Chapters narrated by her (often signalled by sounds such as rain falling) alternate with those of a more privileged third-person narrator who operates in tandem with Maia. A third strand

of narration is introduced when Isabel divulges her secret to the psychiatrist Dr Gregory.<sup>18</sup> This tripartite narrative structure confirms the novel's dependence upon *méconnaissance*. The three skeins of narration present differing levels of knowledge and ignorance, thus obscuring the truth and creating room for suspense and surprise. In Lacan's thinking, 'Truth' is intimately bound up with the way the ego desires to articulate itself as 'I'. But if 'Truth derives its guarantee ... from Speech', then we must also accept that 'it is from Speech that Truth receives the mark that establishes it in a fictional structure' (306).

The opening pages of *The President's Child* suggest that truth will be subordinated to the preferred act of story-telling as entertainment. Beyond this, however, Maia's blindness and her latterday Greek chorus seem to herald the disclosure of universal truths as opposed to factual data. Yet the fact that Maia's blindness is cured - coupled with Weldon's disparagement of 'hysterical blindness' - implies that Maia lacks crucial insight, and that the truth has eluded her. The domestic strand of the novel, which concerns a mother and a father who lie to each other, and a child caught in the middle, raises the question of whether, even on the fundamental level of conjugal relations, sincerity is possible.

On the level at which the plot operates as a thriller, truth is a rare commodity. Isabel's psychologist and the producer of her television show, both of whom could authorize her to publish the truth, are employed by the CIA and so have a vested interest in maintaining a lie. Isabel is guilty of misrepresenting herself to her husband Homer, who is, in fact, much more deceptive than she is. Attempts to monitor the truth include the planting of spies, the electronic bugging of premises and, more drastically, plans to execute people who present a liability because of their access to or penchant for verity.

It is Isabel's compulsion to tell the truth which tightens the trap about her. Inspired by her friend, Jennifer, who advises her that 'truth will out ... the art of dealing with the truth is to let it out, little by little: then you keep it under control. Otherwise enemies get hold of it, and use it against you' (70), Isabel resolves to tell

Dr Gregory of her affair with Dandy Ivel and the true paternity of Jason. In doing so she is telling him only what he already knows (he is a CIA agent), and his response to her confession carries a muted warning:

'What are you trying to tell me?' asked Dr Gregory. 'That you are not the woman you seem? That this is what Jason reacts to? If that is all, you need not go on. Truth is a funny thing. Layers must be peeled away: once you start you cannot go back. Sometimes it is better not to start, but put up with things as they are. There is no guarantee that truth will bring happiness or peace of mind. It can be dangerous. It is not even something definable. It is more like a mountain, that the knowing try to climb.'

'I shall go on,' said Isabel.

Dr Gregory, for some reason, sighed. (80)

Later Isabel makes her confession to Homer, whereupon he punches her and leaves for America (presumably to inform his superiors that she has finally 'cracked'). Her next step is to introduce the 'truth' on her television programme. Elphick, her producer, is nonplussed: 'Television is a strange place in which to seek truth, still less declaim it' (140). But as his probing question - 'you have a conspiracy to reveal?' (141) - suggests, Elphick too is part of the plot against Isabel.

In these numerous examples, truth is feared, pursued and obstructed in the all-consuming cause of ego. Dandy Ivel's public image, and his hubristic defence of it, are burlesqued in the novel. His desire to usurp the ultimate supremacist position acquires satanic overtones. Making love to Isabel, Dandy Ivel

plunged, and ploughed, and ravaged and explored, as if he would own God through me, seek out and understand the very corners of His kingdom, overturning and scattering as he went; he was Lucifer, victorious, discovering his vanquished Lord's possessions, the better to rule over Him. (93)

With the presidency within his grasp, Dandy succumbs to a biblical temptation:

'Have all this, they said: look down from the mountain of Gethsemane and rule all the world; all you can perceive of earth and sky.'

(103)

Cleverly the narrator offers a rewriting of the first and most important allegory of all - the story of the Fall - and lays the blame for eternal damnation firmly at the door of the male. No wonder, then, that Maia, awakening from her blindness, discovers that 'this place where we live is hell: more, the game is never-ending. It is fire, torment, ever-lasting, as the Bible promised' (219). Appropriately enough for a novel where the father's name is at stake, *The President's Child* ends with the implication that the *nom-du-père* will always spoil one's fun.

\* \* \*

If *The President's Child* uses the thriller genre to ridicule egotistical male fantasies, then Weldon's subsequent novel burlesques the delicate fibrillations of formula romance. 'Getting your man' takes on a whole new meaning in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. Ruth, the protagonist, disaffiliates herself from a divine dispensation that has meted out to her ugliness, unrewarding domesticity, a suburban home, ungrateful children and an unfaithful husband. Instead she makes a pact with the devil to avenge her husband's affair with the romantic novelist Mary Fisher. Mary, a pampered, sexually desirable blonde, lives in a converted lighthouse to which she lures Ruth's accountant husband, Bobbo. The main action is dictated by Ruth's all-consuming passion to be revenged against Bobbo and to re-form herself in Mary's image.

Ruth begins by abandoning her children and departing the ironically named 'Eden Grove' amidst a massive blaze created through her wicked misuse of household gadgetry. Before she can be transformed, Ruth undergoes a series of mutations, constantly reinventing herself in order to facilitate her vengeful plans. While working in an old age home she manages to have Mary's embarrassing and incontinent mother sent back to her very reluctant daughter; nursing in an asylum for the criminally insane she meets Nurse Hopkins whose savings enable them to found the employment agency, Vesta Rose. With unlimited access to the business world,

Ruth frames her husband on embezzlement charges. A long imprisonment is assured when Ruth takes a job as nanny in the home of the presiding judge and exploits his sado-sexual urges. With Bobbo incarcerated and Mary's fictional powers waning, Ruth places herself in the surgical hands of Doctors Ghengis and Black. Mary Fisher dies of cancer almost simultaneously with the last of the painful operations which remake Ruth as her double. Patricia Smith puts it neatly:

Her ultimate revenge against the guilty pair, however, is her becoming Mary Fisher by means of plastic surgery. Ironically, by doing so she becomes, both literally and figuratively, her own worst enemy.

(1993:255)

Finally, Ruth inhabits the lighthouse, Bobbo in attendance as her pathetically grateful slave.

The action is preposterous. The plot and its excesses produce not only an excellent crop of feminist jokes - about the madness in marital scraps, the lunatic extremes of cosmetic surgery, the restraints imposed by motherhood and, above all, about male impotence - but also a series of psychoanalytic effects. These are parodic rather than serious. Whereas Mary owns and inhabits the 'high tower', Bobbo's name already hints at castration. Mary's phallic abode comes to symbolise Ruth's desire, which is not for Bobbo, but for Mary's body. Ruth seeks to identify herself with Mary of the High Tower, to merge into a mirror image of her 'rival'.

For Lacan,

... the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium - its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form ... symbolizes the id in a quite startling way. (5)

The lighthouse is indeed the site of contention and the object of subliminal desires in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. But this 'lofty, remote inner castle' is hardly an ideal by the time Ruth has imported into it her two ungainly, crisp-eating, Coca-Cola swigging children, Mary's incontinent mother and - the ultimate leveller - financial worries. The novel takes desire (for beauty, sex, money or, frankly, someone else's

life) and runs with it until all desire flags. And through her merciless mockery of lust and aspiration, Weldon parodies a diverse range of targets from romance fiction to psychoanalysis and cosmetic surgery. The ending of the novel, when Ruth apparently has what it was she set out to achieve, is perhaps intentionally an anticlimax. To live happily ever after in unremarkable bliss, is utter boredom. Our heroine has, with several fell swoops, destroyed the object(s) of her desire, and of our interest. Mary is dead; Bobbo is a crushed, if new, man; tall, ruthless Ruth has become a sober, short and slender woman; and the high tower has been renovated so that the waves no longer crash against it.

Ruth's desire interrupts the narrative; the third person is forced to give way to the demonic tirades of a first-person voice:

And I tell you this; I am jealous! I am jealous of every little, pretty woman who ever lived and looked up since the world began. I am, in fact, quite eaten up by jealousy, a fine, lively, hungry emotion it is. But *why* should I care, you ask? Can't I just live in myself and forget that part of my life and be content? Don't I have a home, and a husband to pay the bills, and children to look after? Isn't that enough? 'No!' is the answer. I want, I crave, I die to be part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust. It isn't love I want; it is nothing so simple. What I want is to take everything and return nothing. What I want is power of the hearts and pockets of men. (24)

The energy contained in this voice and the wicked, even vicious imagination that informs it, initially imbues the novel with a powerful sense of direction, verve and impetus. Desire gives Ruth the energy to fight passivity and to exact what she craves. Suzanne Moore describes the novel as 'a complete antidote to those countless articles that appear in women's magazines telling us how to channel our anger into something more *positive*, like knitting. The She-Devil is relentlessly and gloriously negative, her hatred all-consuming, the living embodiment of an anger that knows no bounds' (1990:47). Terence Rafferty in the *New Yorker* refers to the novel as a 'housewife's revenge fantasy' (1988:66) and in *The Illustrated London News* Harriet Waugh calls it 'a tale of ideal revenge' (1984:64). At the heart of Ruth's

revenge is the reflex, "Nil bastardi carborundum" ....or, don't let the bastards grind you down' (167).

Nor does she. Ruth's revenge against erring husband Bobbo and his lover Mary Fisher is ruthlessly systematic. Mary's princess-like existence in her converted lighthouse is disenchanted and her wealth is whittled away. Bobbo cheats on her, he is accused of embezzling and imprisoned; finally Mary develops cancer, finds God and dies. Ruth usurps not only Mary's appearance, but her success, her talent (Ruth writes a publishable novel), her compliant manservant, her tower and, in some crucial sense, her lifeblood.

The extremes of Ruth's revenge have posed problems for reviewers and critics who cannot account for the sheer volume of Ruth's malice:

Ruth becomes something of a parody of the "liberated" woman - a bitter harridan bent on using her sexual wiles and a 1970's license for self-indulgence to inflict hurt on others. (Kakutani,1984:C17)

The shortcoming in such readings is that they concentrate on the revenge and ignore the fantasy.<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Jackson, in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, offers the following insight:

In expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (according to the different meanings of 'express'): it can tell of, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can expel desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force). (1981:3-4)

Ruth's stylized revenge and her self-transformation are not a call to readers to follow her example. Weldon's strategy here may, in fact, be not dissimilar (ironically enough) to that of a romantic novelist such as the fictional Mary Fisher, whose readers participate vicariously in the satisfactions of the heroine. The enjoyment of fantasy, then, is an indictment not of the reader, but of the society that leaves so much to be desired. According to Weldon, the novel inspired 'a deluge of mail ...

from women who felt unattractive and lived in fear of prettier women' (Sibree, 1995:2).

The desire that initially provokes excitement in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* eventually leads to a palling of narrative interest. Sheer exhaustion accompanies the inevitable realisation that Ruth's successive metamorphoses will bring her not fulfilment but a recognition of absence, of non-achievement. She is not Mary Fisher:

I am a lady of six foot two, who had tucks taken in her legs. A comic turn, turned serious. (240)

Boredom results from the repetitive actions by which Ruth gradually works towards the accretion of her desire. These false attempts to calculate that which is not, in fact, a commodity, relegate her to the level of her accountant husband:

A monetary scale for love-making, Bobbo thought, would have to set the sum of earning-capacity-wasted plus energy-consumed against the balance of pleasure-gained plus renewed-creativity. A cabinet minister's coitus, however feeble, could work out at some \$200, a housewife's entr'acte, however energetic, a mere \$25. An act of love with Mary Fisher, a high earner and energetic with it, would be worth \$500. An act of love with his wife would be graded at \$75, but of course occurred more often so unfortunately would yield a diminishing return. The more often sex with a particular person happened, Bobbo believed, the less it was worth. (17-18)

Bobbo's calculations are reinforced when Garcia, surveying Ruth, perceives that 'she would be his three girl friends rolled into one. He could reduce the loving courtship rituals the village girls demanded by two-thirds and still find satisfaction. The term "bulk buy" came into his mind' (68). The auditing of sexual desire and performance ultimately reveals a shortfall, evident in the refrain of characters as they survey their lives and echo T.S.Eliot's words, 'But this is not what I meant. Not what I meant at all' (98).<sup>20</sup> Arriving at that point of beauty and wealth where she may enjoy 'the comfortable thought that ... the future lay in refusing men rather than submitting to them - or, indeed, hoping for their advances' (231), Ruth mistakenly thinks she is free from desire. In psychoanalytical terms, this is not possible.<sup>21</sup>

My argument, that Ruth is unconsciously more concerned to identify herself with Mary Fisher than she is to make herself the object of Bobbo's desire, depends upon a different reading of cosmetics in the novel. Lacan teaches that our fragmented ego relies heavily upon our body image, which looking glasses, as well as the sight of other people, persuade us to accept as an autonomous whole. Ruth's relationship with the mirror (and other people) is not so happy, and to combat her profound sense of self-alienation she sets out to become Mary Fisher. In fact this only leads to further fragmentation. As we have already seen, throughout *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Ruth undergoes a series of metamorphoses that demand a constant shift in her personal identity. She is variously Polly Patch, Vesta Rose, Molly Wishant and Miss Hunter. Each incarnation allows Ruth access to yet another seat of male power, as she inveigles her way into the beds and minds of, inter alia, the judge who will try Bobbo's case and the priest who will convert Mary. Ultimately, Ruth becomes Mary Fisher too. Thus while her final disclaimer that she is merely a tall lady made shorter may have the effect of closing the fantasy, it does not dismiss the conviction that Ruth is also a she-devil. Pondering the grammatical oddity of the last sentence of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Patricia Smith suggests that

Weldon's use of "I am" [here] is indicative of the ontological problem the text requires the reader to confront: Exactly who, by the end of her narrative, is Ruth Patchett? (1993:255)

Ruth has been altered by cosmetic surgery and yet insists that she is as she always was; she has become a pretty little romance novelist but is still a she-devil. Nothing, in fact, has been resolved, and there is the implication, at least, that the cycle of malicious revenge could begin again.

Ruth's protean quality relates to an authorial perception concerning women. In an interview with Shirley Kossick,<sup>22</sup> Weldon asserted that a fluid identity is one of the inherent problems of womanhood, since changing one's name has traditionally been a female obligation. In her fiction, this 'problem' becomes a strategy for

deferring meaning and eluding final assessments. Weldon's choice of a fantastic mode highlights the notion of a destabilised identity:

It could be suggested that the movement of fantastic narrative is one of *metonymical* rather than of *metaphorical* process: one object does not *stand for* another, but literally becomes that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability.

(Jackson, 1981:41-2)

The flux and instability described by Jackson become a function of Weldon's disconcerting narrative technique in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. An alternating narrative viewpoint which shifts between the third person and the first person is a favourite device of hers, and one which maintains the idea of a fluid identity. But Ruth is a first-person narrator with a difference. Weldon mentioned in her interview with Kossick that she found this narrative viewpoint difficult to maintain. This is not surprising, since Ruth, as a she-devil, could conceivably 'know' what is usually the third person's exclusive and privileged terrain. Yet the third person remains essential to the narrative, because Ruth's obsession with Bobbo and Mary and her revenge means that she has no interest in reporting on anything other than her own idiosyncratic preoccupation. At first, distinguishing between the two voices is simple enough. Ruth's chapters abound in first-person assertions, are framed in the somewhat other-worldly historic present tense, and often begin with a malicious reference to Mary Fisher.<sup>23</sup> But later this distinction seems to collapse. In Chapter 28, for example, the third person appears to be narrating (as indicated by various signs of epistemological superiority), when the smooth progress of the telling is suddenly interrupted by the announcement, 'Garcia removes his eye from the keyhole: my vision of the scene is lost' (197). This disruption throws out any remaining assumptions regarding the trustworthiness of the narration. No distinctions can be made between fallible and infallible sources; there is no recourse to neutrality. Weldon's narrative strategy exemplifies the impossibility of defining (or confining) women, and cosmetic surgery becomes a trope for the fact that 'Woman is ... self-divided, different from herself' (Ebert, 1991:895).

Fay Weldon's response to the two film versions of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* indicates how important Ruth's physical transformation is to the author's conception of her work. Interviewed by Shirley Kossick, the novelist asserted that while she had hated the Hollywood offering, on which she was not consulted, she had really liked the BBC television version (screened in four parts).<sup>24</sup> Susan Seidelman's film completely omits Ruth's transformation into Mary Fisher, perhaps because she hoped to simplify the plot, or because she aimed to portray the morally more acceptable journey, in Moore's words, 'from frump to feminist feelgood' (1990:47).<sup>25</sup> In *She-Devil*, Roseanne Barr's diminutive stature unfortunately invalidates the novel's central joke, namely that above all Ruth desires to look up to men. The television series, on the other hand, was praised for its faithful portrayal of the novel:

The BBC four-part serial treads carefully between satire and pathos, the comic and the macabre. Ted Whitehead's adaptation stays close to the text, making the most of Weldon's sharp, snappy prose, her acid wit and very funny one-liners. (Brandmark, 1986:27)

Ruth's physical alteration into an ideal of beauty is skilfully enacted by Julie T. Wallace and Patricia Hodge. The visual medium has the advantage of being able to speed up a process, giving the viewer the impression, but not the tedious experience of time passing. In Weldon's novel, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Ruth's metamorphosis is more laboured.

Of all the different facets of the novel, Ruth's cosmetic rebirth is surely the most controversial: it certainly does not make the novel a simple one to read in terms of feminist theory. Indeed, it is interesting to examine Weldon's treatment of cosmetic surgery in the context of the powerful objections raised by such an influential writer as Naomi Wolf:

The dawn of the Surgical Age in the 1980s did result from some technological advances in the profession. It drew far more energy, though, from the beauty backlash against feminism. The two developments - the means and, more important, *the will* completely to alter women - has brought us to an extraordinary mental upheaval surrounding life in the female form.

With the shift in rhetoric that recast pain and mutilation into diminished language, female consciousness has had to reckon with the sort of destruction of the rules that faced human thinking when the atom was split. With the huge expansion of possibility came a huge expansion of danger. (1990:252)

In complete contrast to this serious assessment of the implications of altering one's body, Weldon wrote an article in support of cosmetic surgery for *New Woman* in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Discussing this extraordinary contradiction with Shirley Kossick, Weldon said she based her defence on two points, that all women care about their appearance, even if they only apply lipstick, and that it is therefore false to say surgery is wrong when it is only a logical extension of the purchase of cosmetics and fashionable clothing. This argument is typical of Weldon's contrary logic, which has so often confronted patriarchal notions, but here comes up against feminist reasoning.

Without wishing to defend Weldon's dubious and possibly even dangerous views, I would like to highlight her predilection for unorthodoxy, play, and the breaking of rules. A serious feminist reading of *The Life and Loves of A She-Devil* completely misses the essential humour underlying the surgery to which Ruth submits herself. Psychoanalysis reminds us of the importance of jokes (especially those with a double meaning) in our understanding of how the unconscious operates. Ruth's first consultation with her cosmetic surgeon contains just such a joke:

'Tell me,' he said, for he believed in the power of intimacy, 'what is it you *really* want?'

'I want to look up to men,' she said, better-humoured already, and she laughed her grating, uncomfortable laugh. 'That's what I want.' (174)

Ruth's demand that Mr Ghengis should make her petite masks an unconscious frustration at not being able to admire ('look up to') the opposite sex.

Ruth's cosmetic surgery, through which she is reborn into a Venus 'risen freshly from her conch-shell' (222), presents even more parodic possibilities. Susan Gubar, in "'The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity' describes how Pygmalion, in making Galatea, 'has evaded the humiliation, shared by many men,

of acknowledging that it is *he* who is really created out of and from the *female* body' (1982:73). Dr Black and Mr Ghengis are filled with the same strutting pride as Ruth emerges from the chrysalis of their care.

The number of mythical parallels drawn upon by the narrator at the point of Ruth's transformation have the comic value of excess. By placing herself in the hands of the surgeons Dr Black and Mr Ghengis, Ruth allows them to come 'the nearest a man could get to motherhood: moulding, shaping, bringing forth in pain and anguish' (214), and to see themselves as a composite Pygmalion. If they have created her, however, then they are also akin to Frankenstein, making her 'a female version of Frankenstein's monster ... with the plates of her scalp pinned together with iron bolts' (223). Ominously, the party at which the exquisite 'Miss Hunter' makes her debut comes to an abrupt end when 'a massive, heavily tranquillised and friendly polar bear, mascot of the Save-the-Bear Society, on loan from the Northern Territories' (223) wakes and escapes into the night, echoing Mary Shelley's famous novel. Not content with these contradictory images of Frankenstein's monster on the one hand, and Venus and Galatea on the other, the narrator introduces yet another mythic parallel in the form of the little mermaid:

Hans Andersen's little mermaid wanted legs instead of a tail, so that she could be properly loved by her Prince. She was given legs, and by inference the gap where they join at the top, and after that every step she took was like stepping on knives. Well, what did she expect? That was the penalty. And, like her, I welcome it. I don't complain. (148)

In Andersen's tale the mermaid relies on the supernatural powers of a witch, who warns:

All who see you will declare you to be the prettiest human being they ever beheld. You will keep your graceful walk; no dancer will be able to move so lightly as you; but every step you take will be as if you trod upon knives, and as if your blood must flow. If you will bear all this, I can help you. (1835:268)

The excruciating pain Ruth is prepared to endure to remodel herself according to the aesthetic inclination of her errant husband makes her the little mermaid's match. But

unlike the fabular sea nymph, Ruth's apparent self-abnegation (evident in her submission to the process of mutilation) belies her determination to use this new body to embody revenge. She may be beautiful, but she is nevertheless still a monster:

From a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible objects - Gorgons, Sirens, Scyllas, serpent-Lamias, Mothers of Death or Goddesses of Night. But from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation, and therefore, like Mary Shelley giving the first-person story of a monster who seemed to his creator to be merely a 'filthy mass that moves and talks,' she presents this figure for the first time from the inside out. Such a radical misreading of patriarchal poetics frees the woman artist to imply her criticism of the literary conventions she has inherited even as it allows her to express her ambiguous relationship to a culture that has not only defined her gender but shaped her mind.

(Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:79)

The similarities between Ruth's predicament and those of Frankenstein's monster and the little mermaid need to be enumerated. Like them, she is tormented by images of an apparently unattainable existence, where couples are in love, and which is populated by dainty, beauteous creatures who co-exist in peace and understanding. Like her mythical siblings, Ruth risks damnation if she attempts to break into that universe which excludes her. The words of Frankenstein's monster could be Ruth's own justification:

I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me? ... I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice.

(1818:495)

Indeed, Ruth's statement, 'hate obsesses and transforms me: it is my singular attribution' (7) offers a précis of the monster's meaning. What Ruth has, and shares in common with Frankenstein's monster, is a desire so overwhelming that it threatens to overthrow the existing order.

All the characters in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* converge on the (m)Other, desirous of becoming her. Ruth seeks to become Mary, and her doctors themselves crave maternity. Since the (m)Other emulated by the chief protagonist is a novelist, there is a sense in which Ruth's desire exceeds even the boundaries of the text itself. But, as is inevitably the case with desire, we are all (characters, readers) left with a disappointing shortfall, or lack. The author herself admitted in her interview with Shirley Kossick that the refrain 'that is not what I meant at all' is a fundamental aspect of her writing, and that she experiences a sense, in each one of her novels, of not saying quite what she meant. It is this sense, moreover, that drives her on to her next project: a truly Lacanian circle of desire discovering lack which sets off desire once more.

## Endnotes

1. Lacan has been accused of being a 'phallogocentric thinker' by Luce Irigaray. Jane Flax, in *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (1990), compares him unfavourably with D.W. Winnicott. My argument in this chapter uses Lacan's theory of primary narcissism (albeit fairly sympathetically) to expose the limits of psychoanalysis in the face of feminist subversion.
2. 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience' is published in *Écrits: A Selection* (trans. Alan Sheridan). London, Hogarth: 1977.
3. The quotation here is from 'Jacques Lacan: Feminism and the problem of gender identity' by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan (1991:220).
4. In the original Freudian theory which Lacan reworks, the Oedipal passage of the little boy is easier. If he continues to desire the Mother, his punishment is castration. Since the little girl already perceives herself to be castrated (hence 'penis envy'), the reasons why she must cease to desire maternal oneness are less clear.
5. In a talk given by Fay Weldon in 1985 she describes *Puffball* as 'a study of opposites: the town versus the country, science versus magic, cold and heat, fantasy and folklore' (Kenyon, 1988:119). That this is a favourite theme of Weldon's (and not a little influenced by her own lifestyle, divided between country farmhouse and London house) is evident in the number of stories she has written which focus on the contrast between country and city. *Moon Over Minneapolis*, a collection published in 1992, contains a special section entitled 'Three Tales of Country Life', and *Watching Me, Watching You* (1981) features the story 'Weekend' which similarly links marital disharmony to country living. These stories share a disillusionment with the rural idyll originally embraced as a sanctuary. In *Puffball* a move to the country once again precipitates marital dissension.
6. In Peter Carey's 1991 novel *The Tax Inspector*, Maria's pregnancy and childbirth create a similar disjunction of genres. Elements of surrealism and suspense contrast with the tax inspector's swollen belly. In the final moment, the psychopath, Benny,

drops Maria's newborn infant; she catches her son and immediately unfastens her bra and begins to nurse him.

7. Paulina Palmer, in *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (1989:103), also offers a brief discussion of some of the parallels between the two works.
8. Weldon herself has a property in Somerset, and in *Sacred Cows* she describes the West Country as 'home of tarot cards, the *I Ching*, astrological charts and the like'; a place where the 'Witch of Endor rides her broomstick in full daylight' (1989:1).
9. In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer states, '[The average woman's] knowledge of the womb is academic: most women do not actually feel any of the activity of their ovaries or wombs until they go wrong' (1970:47).
10. Palmer raises some of these problems in her discussion of the novel, but suggests that they should be balanced against Weldon's identification of birth and reproduction as 'the hub of a fierce battle between the sexes' (1989:99).
11. Natural childbirth refers to delivery without the now common procedures of shaving, enema, epidural analgesia, caesarian section, monitoring of foetal heartbeat and uterine contractions. Barbara Katz Rothman, in *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society* (1989), speaks of the 'commodification' of motherhood that results from the increased use of technology in delivery wards. Oakley and Kitzman reject unnecessary technology on the grounds that it turns women into machines and robs them of control over their own bodies (many of the procedures render a woman immobile).
12. Olga Kenyon draws an interesting parallel between this novel and Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*, published in the same year: 'Both novels include thriller-type episodes that would make exciting film sequences, to demonstrate the mercilessness of male power, still impervious to female values' (1988:121).
13. The 22nd Amendment to the Constitution (1951) states that 'no person shall be elected President more than twice'. Weldon may knowingly have imputed this error to her two secret agents in order to compound their foolishness. But, as my discussion of *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (Chapter Four) will show, we cannot always be certain that she knows the facts herself.
14. Joe and Pete, the CIA agents, have no compunction in brutally dispensing with yet another of Dandy Ivel's suspected sexual transgressions. Since Vera, a Dutch girl living on a Teepee settlement, has none of Isabel's connections, her fate is to be assaulted, stripped and finally shot. Like Isabel, she is guilty of having told the truth, namely that on the occasion Dandy visited her in her teepee, he 'had not - to put it crudely - been able to get it up' (122). Two interesting implications emerge from the

allegorical dimension of the text here. Firstly, women may not challenge the kingpin of male dominance - sexual virility - and, secondly, men are as liable to image-related neurosis as women. Ironically, the claim that 'the Democratic candidate to the Presidency [is] a sexual inadequate' (123) is considered as damaging, if not more so, than the fact of his fathering an illegitimate child.

15. This physical impairment links her to other Weldonian narrators: Jocelyn, in *Down Among the Women* is emotionally scarred, Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is hideous and occasionally demented, the narrator of *Growing Rich* is confined to a wheelchair. The choice of disabled narrators has important implications, as Gilbert and Gubar adumbrate:

Surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations both to disease and to dis-ease, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature...the notion that "Infection in the sentence breeds" has been so central a truth for literary women that the great artistic achievements of nineteenth-century novelists and poets from Austen and Shelley to Dickinson and Barrett Browning are often both literally and figuratively concerned with disease, as if to emphasize the effort with which health and wholeness were won from the infectious "vapors" of despair and fragmentation.

(1979:57)

16. For example, they offer the following melancholy assessment of their lot:
- We are not perfect, here in Wincaster Row. We are not entirely rational or entirely noble or entirely forgiving. We have our fears and our angers and our points of obsession, like anyone else. But we are kind to our children, and each other; the struggle for self-improvement is assumed, and with the improvement of the self the improvement of the world. (7-8)
17. Despite Weldon's contention that 'you could complain of all sorts of contrivances and coincidences in the book' (Haffenden, 1985:309), *The President's Child* actually interrogates the notion of a random destiny capable of producing synchronous events unaided. The seating of Isabel next to Dandy Ivel on Concorde's maiden flight, and the meeting of Homer and Isabel at the airport as she flees, are demonstrably not coincidental, nor are any of the 'accidents' that nearly befall Isabel. From *The President's Child* the hypothesis emerges that destiny, once thought to be in the hands of God, has been appropriated by men in power.
18. Again, this confessional mode is a favourite device of Weldon's. In the collection *Moon over Minneapolis*, several stories are grouped under the heading 'As told to Miss Jacobs', and are essentially first-person confessions delivered from the couch.
19. In *Sacred Cows*, Weldon proffers the view: 'The understanding of fantasy as an alternative reality, of fiction as truth, of the poetic intuition which links them, is

something that tends to escape the Brit.Lit.Comm.- the British Literary Community to you' (1989:40).

20. The words are quoted by Mary Fisher in this instance, and again by Vickie (170). The source is *The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock* (97-98).
21. In "'Bold but Not too Bold": Fay Weldon and the Limits of Poststructuralist Criticism', Alan Wilde argues that the apparent extremes of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* mask the author's predilection for 'means and middles' (1988:412), and that Weldon's real aim in the novel is 'to [call] Ruth to account for her petty and ... "trivial" goals' (1988:414). This is another way of explaining the (literally) unsatisfactory ending of the novel.
22. The interview with Shirley Kossick referred to throughout this chapter took place on Friday 8 January 1993 in Kentish Town.
23. The historic present tense is used for dramatic effect to describe events that would ordinarily have been cast in the past tense.
24. *She-Devil* was directed by Susan Seidelman and stars Meryl Streep as Mary Fisher and Roseanne Barr as Ruth. The film, according to Suzanne Moore, 'has not done good business in the States' (1990:47). Moore quotes an American critic, 'Do we have to watch this beached whale on screen for ninety minutes?' (1990:47). By contrast, the television series, starring Julie T. Wallace and Patricia Hodge, enjoyed great popularity in Britain. Episode Three 'achieved the highest viewing figures for the series and for BBC2 at 9.95 million' (Bird and Eliot, 1993:222).
25. The film, as well as the American edition of the novel, omits Ruth's sojourn in a separatist commune, 'apparently because it was felt that it would give offence to sisterhood' (Sage, 1989:3). Bird and Eliot believe that the adaptation of the screenplay by two men, Barry Strugatz and Mark Burns, 'resulted in a significant watering-down of the original novel' (1993:228).
26. 'The Wider Shores of Self' appears in Regina Barecca (ed.) *Fay Weldon's Wicked Fictions* (1994).

## Chapter Four

*The Shrapnel Academy* (1986)

*The Heart of the Country* (1987)

*The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987)

Gentle reader! What have I said! You are no more gentle than I am.  
I apologise for insulting you. You are as ferocious as anyone else.

(SA:59)

A pill, please. I must finish the story.

(HC:185)

Grief for the loss of Nell, for her childhood, for her marriage to Clifford, for Simon, for the humiliation rendered her by Sally Agnes St Cyr, for the wretchedness of everything - all was unlocked and released on that afternoon, as Helen wept and little Edward, without his accustomed audience, fell asleep on the lawn, and was nearly, nearly stung by a wasp on his lip - though no one but you and me, reader, will ever know that!

(HLM:188-9)

'No one has a bad word to say about Fay Weldon', announced Melvyn Bragg in his London *Sunday Times* interview with the novelist (1984:22). At the time, Weldon was indeed at the height of her fame: solicited, interviewed, fêted. *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* had been turned into an acclaimed film for BBC television; *Praxis* had made her a Booker prize nominee; she was herself now on the panel of judges for this prestigious literary competition. A large measure of her success doubtless lay in her wit, both as a public figure frequently called upon for instant

repartee, and as an author well-versed in comic techniques. Popularity brought with it substantial financial rewards, including lucrative film contracts, publisher's advances and magazine syndication. Not surprisingly, critics and reviewers began to take a dim view of the increasingly commercial orientation of Weldon's artistic output. And indeed, from a literary perspective there is little comparison between her early, almost viciously funny feminist novels - *Down Among the Women* (1971), *Female Friends* (1975) - and her most recent novels - *Growing Rich* (1991), *Life Force* (1992), *Affliction* (1993) - with their opportunistic presentation of contemporary venality. Soon, indeed, *everybody* had a bad word to say about Fay Weldon.

A discussion of Weldon's apparent failure to realise her early potential is now pertinent because, although the first two novels to be discussed in this chapter - *The Shrapnel Academy* (1986) and *The Heart of the Country* (1987) - must be ranked among Weldon's successes, *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987) arguably marks the onset of her literary decline. Since she remains an undeniably comic writer, this deterioration may at first seem baffling. Yet it is comedy and its various effects, I believe, that holds the answer to the problem of Weldon's descent from the sublime to the banal. I propose to show in this chapter, therefore, how Fay Weldon's fiction gradually becomes the victim of her own incorrigible wit. Once the coruscating weapon with which she undercut patriarchy's cherished supports, Weldon's comic gift became enfeebled and was reduced to mere flippancy. In elaborating on this point, I shall have recourse to an eclectic range of theories of humour propounded by Freud, Bergson as well as by feminist critics.<sup>1</sup>

1988 saw the publication of no fewer than five critical works in the previously neglected field of women's humour.<sup>2</sup> Reviewing these works in *Feminist Studies*, Eileen Gilooly suggests that

the most important attribute of humor from a feminist perspective ... may be its ability to challenge the dominant ideological discourse and, by association, the power structure that discourse supports without openly confronting them.... humor successfully weakens the dominant

ideology by meticulously representing its contradictions and absurdities and, in so doing, exposing them to ridicule. (1991:478)

It is not difficult to find, in *The Shrapnel Academy* and *The Heart of the Country*, power structures that are challenged and absurdities that are ridiculed. Military arenas and Britain's social security system certainly provide weighty matter for satire; these novels illustrate how, in Marleen Barr's words, 'feminist humor ... emanates from the "Aha!" experience of seeing how patriarchy functions' (1989:96). At its best, Weldon's humour employs the outrageous to vent outrage. *The Shrapnel Academy*, which interrogates the institutionalised carnage of state war machines, ends with the implosion of a military academy caused by paranoid dinner guests. *The Heart of the Country*, which exposes the iniquitous domestic conditions prevailing in Britain's welfare economy, concludes with the incineration of a carnival float depicting ideal housewives.

In both these novels the wit works well; Weldon's 'last laugh' stems from a quite literal enactment of the scenario identified by both Bergson and Freud as being essential to the comic. Their explosive endings perfectly illustrate the capacity of wit to diminish the exalted and to undermine that which is apparently entrenched and unbending.<sup>3</sup> According to Bergson, laughter is a corrective for

a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability.

(1911:74)

Freud, in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905),<sup>4</sup> also argues that jokes set themselves up 'against an inhibiting and restricting power' (133). In *The Shrapnel Academy* Weldon stretches the credibility of a disciplined, regimented band of military die-hards who are destroyed by the failure of their own stratagems. In *The Heart of the Country*, Sonia and Natalie break out of the vicious cycle of their own indigence and consequent dependence upon exploitative males by turning an occasion of respect into a farce. Bergson asserts that because formal occasions (like the sixtieth annual Wellington lecture or the stately procession of floats in honour of

West Country businessmen) are characterised by a certain rigidity, 'the ceremonial side of social life must ... always include a latent comic element' (1911:89). I would argue that since the formal, rigid and ceremonial aspects of life have very often been used to shore up patriarchal interests, Weldon's success in these two novels lies in her use of feminist humour to 'blow up' (both in the sense of comic inflation and in the sense of detonation) the powers that be.

In an article about the rise of comediennes, Ellen Hopkins suggests that

Power doesn't just reside in *not* being the target of a comic's jokes. Real power is being the one who's telling them. (1990:1)

But clearly this power is not easily achieved. If we look again at the endings of *The Shrapnel Academy* and *The Heart of the Country*, the laughter they produce is certainly not complacent. A death toll of three hundred and thirty-one, or the incineration of one woman and the incarceration of another, are hardly the stuff of gentle comedy. Judith Wilt, in 'The Laughter of the Maidens, the Cackle of the Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision', posits that for women there is a 'boundary where comedy ceases to cheer and succor and becomes violent, destructive, murderous ...' (1980:174). In Fay Weldon's most acclaimed works (*Down Among the Women*, *Praxis*, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*) there is always a bitter twist to the comedy, an acknowledgement that the rapier of wit draws blood. When her writing becomes less bitingly tendentious, it loses the power referred to by Ellen Hopkins.

*The Hearts and Lives of Men*, for example, is simply a good yarn. Although one could argue that it directs some witty barbs at the manipulation of the fine art market, it is primarily an entertainment, and proposes as much from the outset:

You know already this story is to have a happy ending. But it's Christmastime. Why not? (5)

Conscious of the seasonal requirement, Weldon creates a simplistic moral framework. The good - like Helen and Nell - are beautiful and receive their just

rewards. The evil - like Angie and Mr Blotton - are irrevocably unattractive and suffer accordingly. *Broken Homes Are Bad For Children* is perhaps the novel's most obvious caution, although *Beware Bad South Africans* might come a close second. Tampering with black magic is self-evidently bad; maintaining a simple faith is good. As if apologising for these unsophisticated conclusions, the narrator reminds us that

We all live by myth, reader: if only the myth of happiness round the corner. (371)

The gentle, conciliatory tone of this generalisation is the very opposite of the confrontational approach that is one of the hallmarks of Weldon's best fiction, and it suggests a capitulation. There is, following *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, less attack, more search for common ground. Significantly, in 1988 Fay Weldon published a brief, flippant piece entitled 'Towards a humorous view of the universe' in the otherwise serious academic journal *Women's Studies*.<sup>5</sup> The essay, which defends the right to joke about subjects (such as AIDS or the Zeebrugge Ferry disaster) usually considered taboo, illuminates Weldon's *modus operandi* in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*. In the same vein as 'Towards a humorous view of the universe', the novel's focus on disaster and moral degeneration is tempered by a light comic touch. In itself, this is not a bad method to adopt. However, the novel (and Weldon's discussion on humour) suffers from a careless glibness. Having asserted in the essay that 'lately we've had some pretty severe shocks to our corporate souls, to our group determination that the world is a pleasant place and getting better, that the people in it are well-intentioned and that the universe is fundamentally benign', Weldon concludes that 'there's just not much fun left, and I reckon mirth, which is free, safe and shared, is just about all we have for our consolation' (311). As I proceed to discuss *The Shrapnel Academy*, *The Heart of the Country* and *The Hearts and Lives of Men* in detail, the shift from feminist satire to mild mirth, thus far briefly indicated, will become clearer.

The focus of my argument will be on the personalities of the narrators. As the quotations which preface this chapter indicate, the three novels are dominated by narrators whose extraordinary style and eccentric character generate much of the comedy. In *The Shrapnel Academy*, Weldon adopts a narrator whose perfect mimicry of the pugnacious tones of a warmonger has the effect of satirizing the military machine. *The Heart of the Country* is narrated by Sonia, for whom the novel is a type of therapy she undergoes in the asylum to which she has been committed following the climactic criminal action of the text. In a more frivolous vein, *The Hearts and Lives of Men* is narrated by a socialite with the most extraordinary omniscient power. Not only does she claim to have attended high society parties in London in the 1960s, she is also inexplicably capable of telling us about a wasp which almost stung a toddler during an interview at which she was not present some twenty years ago. Though a cursory glance at these narrators suggests that they operate similarly as self-reflexive devices in the text, the dilly socialite of *The Hearts and Lives of Men* is incapable of subversion. By contrast, the narrator of *The Shrapnel Academy* who thunders away about the achievements of war, inadvertently produces a most elegant argument for pacifism.

*The Shrapnel Academy* is an anti-bellum satire structured around one central occasion, namely the sixtieth annual Wellington lecture, to be delivered by General Leo Makeshift at the Shrapnel Academy. The Academy is named after Henry Shrapnel who invented the 'exploding cannonball' and who is consequently a fitting role model for recruits about to be schooled in the ingenuity of arms and armies. The arrival of the General, his 'secretary' Bella Morthampton, his chauffeur Ivor, and the other guests (who include an arms dealer, a battered war hero, and a journalist from a feminist newspaper), provides the narrator with an opportunity to create thumbnail sketches of the characters and to expose some of their foibles. Sleeping arrangements at the Academy become an economical device for exposing the strictly hierarchical criteria of the defence forces. Since the rooms are also named after

great military figureheads such as Tiglath-Pileser and Napoleon, the narrator needs little excuse to embark on historical digressions.

Weldon draws on her experience in television in constructing a country house scenario. Overtones of thriller and detective genres are reinforced when the guests discover not only that they have been snowed in, but that their fears of insurrection among the servants (a legion of illegal aliens) have been confirmed. When they realize they have been served dog paté sandwiches with their cocoa, the animal-loving English are in no doubt that they have also been served a declaration of war. Weldon, who wrote the first episode for the acclaimed *Upstairs, Downstairs* series, employs a similar device to recreate within the hallowed halls of the Shrapnel Academy a miniaturized battle between the classes.<sup>6</sup> In view of the weapons involved, this is a conflict no one can win, let alone survive.

Critics of the novel have taken issue with its narrative method, in particular its tone:

Her theme is war, with herself as truth-teller. Each room in her military academy, named after Shrapnel, inventor of the exploding shell, is dedicated to a general. This allows her to indulge her favoured technique of enumeration of the awful, 58 000 dead here, four million there. Fact is even more terrible than fiction; she should leave it to speak with less authorial intrusion.

(Kenyon, 1988:124)

Kenyon takes her cue from Anita Brookner, whom she quotes: 'Where there is too much indignation, the satire vanishes' (124). These comments do not do justice to the full impact of Weldon's satirical arsenal in *The Shrapnel Academy*. She attacks her subject - the atrocities of warfare - with a range of techniques that demythologize conflict and heroism. These include documentary, bathos, contrast, sarcasm, ridicule and caricature.

Weldon's narrator is, appropriately, two-faced. On the one hand a hearty, gung-ho voice exclaims 'Lovely' (45) approvingly after reporting the exploits of Emperor Tiglath-Pileser III (whose 'Assyrians came down like the wolf on the fold')<sup>7</sup> cries 'Bully for you, Alexander' after outlining his method of 'using human beings

themselves as weapons' (48), and utters a congratulatory 'Good on you, Charlemagne! Good on you, cobber!' (58) once the French king's strategy of expropriating crops has been explained. Not to appreciate the elegance and sophistication of such carnage, not to agree that 'it was fun, fun, fun!' (65) when Genghis Kahn raped and pillaged, is to invite the sneering put-down, 'Plaintive civilian whines!' (60).

On the other hand, we are also addressed by a distinctly maternal narrative voice, one which offers helpful hints on cooking pumpkin and thickening sauce. This narrator subverts the offensive instruction meted out elsewhere, as she fusses over sleeping arrangements ('is it the oldest guest or the most entertaining who deserves the quilt which does not lose feathers?' [53]), and refuses to sympathize with Joan Lumb's concern that she has too many male dinner guests ('You have your troubles, Joan Lumb, I have mine!' [38]). In contrast to the bellicose amateur of war, the second narrator is apparently female and pacifist. She is scandalized by the Watergate tapes ('It is hard to imagine how barbarous the language of our leaders is, in private' [144]), and at one point, after describing a most appalling scene from Napoleon's Russian campaign, feels compelled to offer us a word of encouragement:

Reader, I *know* it isn't easy. But if I can write it, you can read it.

(182)

Indeed, throughout the novel, readers are addressed as if they were flagging troops, in need of morale-boosting before facing the next onslaught in the form of explicit and historically accurate accounts of warfare. The reader is abjured not to omit the didactic interludes with 'do not skip. I know you want to' (44). The narrative which these messages interrupt is treated as a concession to the palate:

Now. Your appetite for facts has perhaps returned? Your documentary indigestion has abated? You are ready for Napoleon, the greatest military genius of all time?

(80)

To win support for her enterprise, the narrator divulges her rationale, and openly identifies the enemy target:

If we are to get the better of Joan Lumb, we must know more than she does: that is why we have had these boring lectures on Tiglath-Pileser, Adolphus, Augustus, and so forth. We must also know more about ourselves, which is on the whole more entertaining, and that is why Bella Morthampton, Leo Makeshift, Ivor the chauffeur, Victor and Shirley Blade and the little Blades, Baf Winchester, Murray Fairchild, Panza Jordan, Sergei Wootton, Muffin Aldrid and Joan Lumb are all gathered under the sound and well-funded roof of the Shrapnel Academy. For what is the point of fiction except self-discovery?

(70)

Ironically, then, the narrator is as military in her precision as are the seasoned campaigners who constitute the butt of her satire. This is particularly evident in the table plan she supplies at the beginning of Chapter Eighteen, and the timetable of events which lead up to the novel's explosive conclusion. Like any determined combatant, the narrator is not averse to deploying deception. A gift for ventriloquism enables her to mimic the voice of a military bully, and this in turn contributes to a dominant tone of sarcasm. For example, an army's propensity for devastating sites where it sets up camp is glossed over: 'What's a whole host of flowers? What are these little passing things, compared to Glory, Victory, Conquest, Triumph, Freedom and so forth?' (85). The corrosiveness of the sarcasm is counterpoised by occasional lapses into sentimental philosophy, as evidenced in platitudes such as 'Everyone needs someone to be kind to them' (11). The ironic reassurance, following the complete devastation of the Academy and its occupants, that 'Grass and flowers have grown up through the rubble of what used to be the Shrapnel Academy' (202), is a nice inversion.

The very domesticity of the narrator is, nevertheless, a disarming device. For example, the portentous opening of the novel, with its ostensibly respectful reference to 'that great military genius, Henry Shrapnel' and its 'reverent' description of the bullet-proof limousine in which the General travels to the academy, is completely undercut by the second paragraph, which is characteristically abrupt:

Bang! Bang! as the children say to each other. Bang, you're dead! (4)

Bathos becomes a crucial component of the narrator's satirical initiative. For example, Baf's miniature hand-weapons, capable of 'megadeath', are compared to 'those silver balls you put on birthday cakes' (60), and the question, 'Does this nation or that really want war?', is equated with 'Does this husband, this wife, really want divorce?' (118). But her *coup de grâce* is a comparison which reduces military leadership to the level of ordinary female experience:

Fortunately he could keep his mind on two things at once. It's a capacity generals have. They share it with mothers.

(125)

The initiators of war, inscribed in history as heroes, are the main targets of Weldon's satire. Men like Tiglath-Pileser III, Charlemagne, Genghis Khan, Alexander and Napoleon have been given heroic status by historians whose criteria have little to do with integrity or humanity. The narrator shares the fruits of her reading with us:

Battles had degenerated alarmingly since the days of Tiglath-Pileser and Alexander and, after them, the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome. Battles were no longer informed by tactics, as they had been in that ancient world. Now there was nothing but a disorderly alignment of opposing warriors, all shoving and pushing, in roughly parallel orders of battle, followed by dull, uninspired butchery (*sic*. I quote a military historian: it is their habit to make this kind of distinction, between inspired death-dealing and uninspired butchery) until one side or the other fled. There was no leadership; no ingenuity, sophistication or discipline on the battlefield at all. Perfectly dreadful, military historians agree!

(57)

The narrator succeeds in exposing the travesty of heroism in the names of the academy's rooms. Most of the suites pay tribute to masters of mass destruction, but one room Joan Lumb has seen fit to name after Mother Teresa, because 'it is important for them to learn ... that the army *cares*' (151).

Joan Lumb is the academy's Custodian/Administrator. She is guilty of the most fawning hero-worship, and comes to stand for the invidious system which

upholds murderers as outstanding examples of human achievement. Her actions are consistently ridiculed in *The Shrapnel Academy*. Joan, in 'a brown tweed skirt (size 18), and a cream woollen blouse (size 12), brown stockings and rather surprising bright yellow shoes (size 8)' (37) is an unlikely romantic foil to the militia, yet this is exactly how she sees herself. Her display of adoration for veteran spy Murray Fairchild is embarrassingly maladroit. While Murray secretly hopes that Joan will have the foresight to send one of her attractive dark-hued servants to his room at night, Joan flirts with him grotesquely: it is 'as if a dog, attempting to be a cat, had jumped on a lap' (76). The narrator's privileged overview allows her to pass on the spiteful anecdote that Joan had, as a child, 'in a fury because she hadn't been chosen to play Mary in the Nativity Play ... topped the heads off every chrysanthemum in the vicar's garden' (162). Joan's spectacular insensitivity is further evidenced in her naming the academy's nursery after Genghis Khan.

The narrator has much fun at Joan's expense. Joan christens the ex-Soweto butler 'Acorn' because 'he seemed to glisten with pride and strength' (55), little understanding the full implication of the word. This has not escaped Acorn himself, who adds that the acorn is 'that from which mighty oaks grow' (55). It is Acorn's growth in strength and influence that is Joan Lumb's downfall. Acorn expands his sphere of control among the downstairs inhabitants to the point where his megalomania rivals that of the figures honoured upstairs. His decision to kill, cook and serve Shirley and Victor's dog marks the onset of a war between the first- and third-world representatives at the academy, and ultimately ends in the death of all but two of the players in this drama.

The apparent innocence of Acorn's name is as inappropriate as that of Murray Fairchild. Weldon selects this crack MI5 infiltrator and veteran of innumerable conflicts for a particularly cruel caricature. He is sixty years old, has 'deflected bullets in Vietnam, withstood torture in Argentina, and narrowly escaped defenestration in Pakistan' (27), but is now 'slightly brain-damaged by various blows to his head over a long period' (30). Yet the man who survived drinking acid in a

San Salvadorian jail, and who has spent his life 'in the secret fight against barbarism, godlessness' (37), also insists on drinking Perrier water and has a special love of red and orange, since 'when he was a child ... his blanket was in red and orange' (69). Murray is the only guest present who knows exactly how dog meat affects his digestive system, and is therefore the first to confirm that they are under attack.

A combination of exaggeration and deflation is used to diminish the stature of men such as Murray and the General. Makeshift is hardly an auspicious name for a commander of forces. Despite the trappings that accompany him, General Leo Makeshift is portrayed as little more than the proverbial dirty old man who brings his mistress with him on this weekend, ill-disguised as his secretary. Nor is he a fearless and reckless lover. Concern for his health leads him to have 'a terrible vision of Bella bouncing naked on the bed, and with each bounce a cloud of dust arising, and himself wheezing and huffing' (58).

In a generational sense, both the General (who has been addicted to sleeping tablets since ordering the destruction of a small French town) and Murray Fairchild belong to the Second World War. As far as contemporary Britain is concerned, Weldon identifies a more insidious foe than Nazi Germany: big business. Joan's brother Victor is no less a villain than the men who have seen action in the field. He appears in the amicable guise of family man, travelling to the Shrapnel Academy in an estate car complete with wife, sleeping children and dog. But his mind is deviously occupied:

There was a lot to be done: his new broom had to sweep briskly.  
There were factories to be re-deployed, lay-offs declared, non-aspirers  
fired, product images re-created, output minimised, profit maximised.

(17)

Economic control turns out to be a more effective weapon than any Baf has on offer when we hear that

That day [Victor] was to cut the proportion of gum in Chewinox by one part in a thousand. Twelve villages in Southern India would die.

(19)

The battle lines here, as in conventional warfare, are divided hierarchically between the haves and the have-nots. In *The Shrapnel Academy*, Weldon creates a microcosm of class conflict within a many-storied building where visiting dignitaries are accommodated in suites on the first floor, and servants sleep in basement dormitories. She depicts Joan as obsessive about the order of precedence, and her mental 'status scale' ranges over eight options from 'Employers, male, white' at the top, to 'Servants, female, black' (52) at the bottom. Britain's immigration policy confers the added disadvantage of illegitimacy upon these subterranean dwellers. Mew, who stumbles into the basement rooms inadvertently, ironically longs to be accepted by this group:

Mew wanted to say, 'But I belong with you. I belong to the poor and oppressed: understand me: let me stay. I am one of the world's victims. I am a woman in a man's world -' but she stayed silent.

(89)

Nevertheless, Mew's distance from both groups, like Ivor's, ultimately saves her life.

At the novel's conclusion, the narrator marshals an uproarious array of comic devices which produce an appalling and yet also highly farcical denouement. A series of misunderstandings and misjudgments (catalogued in timetable form, as befits the academy) result in a naked Mew being summarily tossed down a laundry chute, where the 'heroic' Ivor follows her. Baf's secret weapon, now discharged in their direction, misfires, and Mew and Ivor are the sole survivors of a blast that kills the other '331... souls in residence' (201). The conclusion is, indeed, the irrepressible narrator's most powerful weapon. The misfiring of the CS gas provides her with the perfect opportunity for a digression on the risk of being hoist with one's own petard. Drawing extensively on the historical American invasion of Fort York, Canada, the narrator makes an unmistakably didactic point. The British plan to blow up their arsenal before retreating caused 'the nearest thing to a nuclear

explosion the world had seen before Big Boy in New Mexico in 1945 .... Both sides sat down together and wept' (193-4).

The moral emerging from the Fort York excursus in particular, and from the ending of *The Shrapnel Academy* more generally, is that there are no winners in combat and no reward for war. This directly contradicts the vision of the Academy and its guests. For a common theme running through the work of the military historians which the narrator refers to is that of progress. Successive generations of arms are seen in terms of improvement and the catalogue of battles interspersed through the narrative are supposedly illustrative of the art of professional bloodshed steadily working towards 'perfection'. Satirically, the narrator notes how 'civilization' has progressed to the point where martial deaths can no longer conveniently be measured on an abacus, but need to be calculated on a computer. As Mew concludes, after listening to the General at the dinner party, 'progress in the military sense ... means more and more civilians killed' (150).

Through the medium of an apparently elegant and highly cultivated dinner, the narrator engineers a magnificent set of ironic contrasts. Linen and crystal, protocol and cordon bleu catering notwithstanding, it is a meal for conspirators and butchers, culminating in Panza's cold-blooded explication of the 'lethality index':

He explained that it was the number of deaths any one weapon could expect to bring about in its lifetime, if properly and effectively used. The index of an Assyrian spear was 23, a crossbow 33, a musket 19, a sixteenth-century cannon 43, a great step forward with the eighteenth-century Gaundeval cannon to 940, a howitzer 657,215 -  
 'That's enough,' said Mew. 'I understand.'  
 He seemed sorry not to go on. (129)

The narrator, however, is not to be silenced on the topic. She reveals, later, that the Hiroshima bomb had a lethality index of 4,908,600 and took only six (albeit 'well-educated and highly trained') men to launch (184).

The dinner table talk, coupled with the textbook excerpts, expose the manipulation of discourse to disguise true horror and to serve it up in palatable form.

For example, as the merchant of deadly machines, Baf approaches the subject in the language of hard-sell advertising:

'Sir,' said Baf, 'if we take the criteria of judging a new weapon to be its consistently effective, flexible use in defensive warfare, permitting full exploitation of the advantages of superior leadership; if a decline in casualties for those who use it, combined with a capacity for inflicting disproportionately heavy losses on the enemy is what you're after, then this new range of miniaturised weapons splendidly fits the bill! (125)

The encoded message is simply 'Death on a massive scale is now yours to inflict', but the phrases 'effective, flexible use', 'full exploitation of the advantages' and 'disproportionately heavy losses' cynically gloss over its import. Similarly, Baf keeps the dinner talk flowing by casually mentioning 'an interesting new torture being developed in Belfast' (102), as if the ingenious extortion of information by painful means were simply a matter of diversion. War is a topic of polite conversation at this gathering, in the same vein as art or business might be at another. In fact, war *is* business to them all: Panza, Sergei and Joan are employed in training recruits; the General and Murray have seen active service; Baf relies on war to sell his merchandise. Ironically placed on the level of a human necessity, warmongering gives rise to dark jokes, for example Baf's comment:

When I hear the word peace I reach for my gun. I know I'm going to have to defend myself. (111)

The narrator, too, is given to the cynical defence of military aggression:

Everyone dies in the end. Killing is merely the cutting short of lives. (136)

Peace is good for agriculture, but bad for the economy, bad for love, and bad for civilian morale. Civil unrest, blasphemy, discontent and crime flourish in times of peace. (177)

Such sophistry employed in defence of war reminds us of another of English fiction's bellicose narrators, namely Lemuel Gulliver, who is also permitted by a dryly witty author to warm to his martial theme. As in *The Shrapnel Academy*, the

reader is led into an ethical minefield, tempted on the one hand to follow the lead set by a confident narrator who seems to be in command of an impressive bank of facts, but aware, on the other, of another standard being set by the extra-textual author. *Gulliver's Travels* seems to pose the same rhetorical question as *The Shrapnel Academy*, namely, 'what is the point of fiction except self-discovery?' (70). Certainly, both novels use a deeply prejudiced narrator to probe readers' convictions about the acceptability of aggression.

*The Shrapnel Academy's* simultaneous critique of both global, historical military conflict and a specific, nationally-based class war is made possible by a narrative economy. The battleground has been reduced to a country house where all the main players - unhappy peasants, professional soldiers, weapon merchants, trainers and leaders - are assembled. In this unlikely theatre of war, a scathing satire is produced. Weldon's techniques in the novel include *reductio ad absurdum*, caricature and bathos. Sophisticated military manoeuvres are exposed as mere amateur bungling, the logical outcome of aggression is self-destruction, even implosion, and conflict stems not from world-shattering differences but from the idle and ill-considered remark of a housewife and military ignoramus.

Shirley's inaccurate observation, 'You know what these people are. Some of them actually eat dog!' (112), is rapidly relayed (via Acorn) downstairs, where a suitable retaliation is planned. Shirley and her companions will themselves eat dog, worse still, their own dog, which is cooked and made into pâté.

Through this absurd but nasty action and even nastier counter-action, Weldon casts scorn upon the 'nobility' of war, its petty and unworthy causes and its unscrupulous operators. She delights in exposing the misunderstandings and mishaps which direct (or rather misdirect) the course of battle: a baize door is perceived to have been malignly locked when it only needs to be pushed the other way; the snow cuts off the telephone, but the 'enemy' is blamed for this pernicious deed. *The Shrapnel Academy* marks a departure for Weldon in that the satire is directed not at the perfidy of men in their relations with women, but at a more fundamental

distortion of human values that makes heroes out of murderers and glorifies massacres by identifying them as significant moments of history.

\* \* \*

Weldon returns to more domestic social criticism in *The Heart of the Country*, winner of the 1989 *Los Angeles Times* Award for Fiction. Feisty Sonia, the narrator, is preoccupied with the parlous state of England in the 1980s. 'The fact is, the heart of the country's rotten' (9-10), she asserts. Clearly, the 'country' of the title is not simply rural England, but the state itself, which is to blame for the statistic which sets 'Unemployment, amongst the rural under 25's ...at around 60 percent' (9). As reviewer Brenda Maddox puts it:

*The Heart of the Country* is very political, a wicked satire of survival in the British 1980s, a world of fatherless families, rapacious auctioneers, greedy property speculators, and snobby children. Weldon might just as easily have titled it *Last Days of the Welfare State*. "King Arthur," she seems to cry out, "Your Country Needs You!"

(1988:78)

The miniature canvas of Eddon Gurney in Somerset is Thatcher's Britain in microcosm. The population is divided between those who subsist on Social Security - like Bernard and Flora, who see themselves 'as irrevocably and permanently unemployed' (92) - and those - like Harry, the unprincipled wife deserter and fraud - whose profiteering antics spread misery and dissension.

How characters are accommodated becomes the key to their status in society. Natalie, the abandoned wife who is the focus of the novel, is forced to leave her 'dream bungalow mortgaged up to the hilt' (6). She seeks shelter variously in the Welfare Department's hostel, with Sonia in her cramped council house, in a luxury flat supplied in return for sexual favours, and finally, in Bernard's caravan on the council garbage tip. Collusion among the bank manager, who needs to recover his mortgage, and Natalie's spurned admirers, Arthur and Angus, keeps her ignorant of

her rights. Angus, the auctioneer, sells the house at such a loss that Natalie is barely able to cover the children's school fees. The purchaser is none other than Arthur, who works 'hand in glove' with Angus, earning them the appellation 'Robber barons' (33). Deservedly so, since the house is later sold for 'sixty thousand clear profit' (142).

Angus and Arthur are not given merely to the fraudulent manipulation of financial transactions. More ominously, they are behind the highly secretive Avon Farmer's Trust, which ignores ecological, health and ethical considerations in its bid 'to sell cheap imported agricultural chemicals and foodstuffs' (93). The milk produced by sick cows can be effectively doctored by 'New Wonder Bio-Eater' to meet Milk Marketing Board tests.<sup>8</sup> Weldon translates the bad faith of businessmen such as Harry Harris, Arthur and Angus, into a literal infidelity. Harry runs off with Miss Eddon Gurney 1978; Arthur keeps a room behind his shop for a regular illicit rendezvous; Angus eagerly awaits his chance to take over from Arthur in Natalie's bed. A healthy by-product of Natalie's re-education (courtesy of Sonia) is that she learns to read and reject their motives:

You'll help me out, you say. You'll get a good price for this house.  
You mean if I go to bed with you you will. Otherwise not. (108)

Against this background of capitalist corruption, a depressing portrait of lives dependent upon the not-too-tender mercies of the Department of Health and Social Services emerges. Sonia, a veteran of the system following her divorce, and founder of the Claimant's Union, guides Natalie through its labyrinthine ways. Though Sonia has a home, 'courtesy of a benign if querulous state' (29), the privilege comes of hours spent unravelling the red tape of bureaucrats. As she says, 'It's full time work being on social security' (135-6). Now Natalie too becomes dependent on the benevolence of the state, contributing to a statistic offered by the narrator, namely that '25 per cent of mothers are on social security' (53). Natalie discovers that the only job she can get is so badly paid that it would have to be supplemented by the

Low Income Family Supplement. Sonia speculates that she could 'claim a blanket allowance, a whole 50p!', but dismisses the idea of a pet: 'If you're thinking of going on social security, why don't you cook and eat the dog?' (57).<sup>9</sup> She is disappointed to hear that Natalie's Ben does not suffer from asthma, and advises her friend to 'Encourage a wheeze or two ... they really go for asthma up the DHSS' (131).

Welfare is the butt of Weldon's satire here; it is portrayed as miserly, prudish and, above all, intrusive. Women suspected of receiving support from male lovers immediately have their welfare benefits withdrawn. When Natalie objects, she receives a prim reply:

'It's a world in which you are asking for public funds,' said Mrs Tuckard, primly, 'and your character and behaviour when in receipt of them must be taken into account.' (113-4)

Natalie fears, quite rightly, that she is about to enter into a vicious cycle of low income and state dependence:

But once you're on it ... how do you get off? (68)

In the course of the novel, Natalie explores two options open to her. First she accepts the furnished flat Angus offers her, but in Sonia's postscript we hear that she finally abandons her children and moves into Bernard's caravan on the rubbish tip.

A considerable narrative investment in social realism is evident in these details. The narrator of *The Heart of the Country* insists that the specific social crimes committed in contemporary Britain be seen in the context of a universal struggle between good and evil. Natalie's 'sins', for example, are carefully listed. They range from lust to 'splashing the poor' (14). Good is clearly rewarded, as we see from the couple who agree to take over Natalie's dog in settlement of her debt: their delicatessen business immediately booms!

Within this broad framework of a justice enacted by the narrator-as-God, Natalie proposes her own revenge. Once she has, in Sonia's words, 'stopped acting like a zombie' (98), Natalie is emboldened to use the patronage of Angus and Arthur to turn the tables on them. She is put in charge of the float commissioned by the

'West Avon Estate Agents, Dealers and Auctioneers (Arthur and Angus in disguise)' (53), for the annual West Country carnival. Their plan, to 'put the women onto it .... keep them out of trouble' (159-160), literally misfires. The concept Angus and Arthur have in mind for the float is the suburban, patriarchal myth of happy housewives (complete with frilly aprons and feather dusters) benignly watched over by hugely inflated dummies representing agent and auctioneer. The cynicism of this display is exacerbated by the choice of Flora (unemployed and living in sin on a rubbish tip) as 'Mrs Housewife Princess' (88). Furthermore, this barely disguised paeon to Angus and Arthur is put together by (amongst others) Arthur's long-suffering wife Jane, and Natalie, the woman they have reduced to penury. As they survey the work that is to be done in completing the float, the 'ancient spirit of carnival' (187) overtakes the women. It begins with Jane's idle suggestion that they fashion the dummies to 'look like who they really are?' (186). It ends with Sonia's public denunciation of the 'Robber barons' and an apocalyptic fire in which Flora is killed.

Umberto Eco describes the spirit of carnival as one 'in which we are not concerned by the rules', and 'we feel free, first for sadistic reasons ... and second, because we are liberated from the fear imposed by the existence of the rule' (1984:2). Carnival is particularly suited to the Weldonian universe of female revenge: indeed, it is the clever use of inversion that elevates *The Heart of the Country* from true-to-life suburban drama to the status of brilliant feminist subversion. Carnival is accompanied by a period of license which permits reversals of status such as the jester playing the king or the robber robbed. In Weldon's novel unemployed women get the better of authoritarian businessmen. Natalie's revenge is achieved in this brief period of comic freedom. Her need to have an imbalance redressed is satisfied by the grotesque representation of Angus and Arthur, though most of the spectators are oblivious to her visual mockery. It takes a child (as in the story of the Emperor's clothes) to exclaim:

But that man isn't smiling, he's snarling like my dog. (190)

The simple words, 'Sonia knew the history of the carnival' (185), set our narrator apart from the mild satire of the other housewives. Amidst the confusion of Angus and Arthur helplessly issuing threats and incriminations from the sidelines, Sonia stands up and delivers the speech against 'the robber barons', concluding 'I blame the guilty men ... seducers, fornicators, robbers, cheats!' (192). At this point she and her friend Ros set fire to the float, and in the ensuing blaze, 'the giant effigy of Angus toppled back towards the centre of the float .... it fell on top of the throne, on top of Flora, and Flora died' (194). Even in retrospect, from her position in the mental asylum, Sonia cannot see her action as reprehensible since

the man- or woman-slaughter of another as the high point of a carnival [is] quite another matter - merely the final event of an ancient ritual, consciously or unconsciously consented to by the victim. (86)

Weldon deftly uses the carnival to bring various strands of the narrative together in one climactic moment which settles scores and forces a turning point. Sonia's fulminations against state and society finally achieve concrete expression, albeit a brief moment of triumph before her incarceration in a lunatic asylum. Natalie no longer relies on Angus, but takes Flora's place by moving in with Bernard. Arthur's last-minute change of heart transfixes Flora so that she fails to escape the blaze. When, instead of cheating her, he hands her a cheque for £2000, Flora is mesmerized. In a bitterly ironic carnivalesque inversion,

[Arthur] had achieved a moral act, finally. It killed Flora. (193)

Carnival is an intriguing form of protest.<sup>10</sup> Unlike satire, which aims to bring about change, carnival does not promise that society will reform or that the dominant will be permanently thwarted. Rather, carnival acts as a safety valve, allowing excess emotions to escape in one fantastic day of license. As Natalie Zemon Davis puts it, 'anthropologists generally agree that ... ceremonies of reversal ... are ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society' (1978:153).

The kingpin of *The Heart of the Country* is Sonia, both the engineer of the carnivalesque release and its scapegoat. Because in a number of ways Sonia is a

liminal figure, her narrative is a particularly successful subversion of all forms of authority. Before going on to discuss Sonia's role, I need to explicate the concept of liminality - which traditionally has associations with anthropology rather than literature - and show its relevance to feminist protest.

The word 'liminal' is derived from 'limen', meaning 'threshold', and refers to a concept which gained prominence through the work of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Van Gennep's seminal publication, *The Rites of Passage* (1960) identified three phases of existence in pre-industrial societies, namely separation, transition (the liminal, or marginal, phase) and incorporation. At crucial periods of the life cycle - pregnancy, betrothal or initiation - individuals would find themselves 'liberated from normative demands, when they were, indeed, betwixt and between successive lodgements in jural political systems' (Turner, 1974:13). Like carnival, this time represented a period of license for the participants who could indulge in playful parodies and inversions.

Though van Gennep was exclusively concerned with pre-industrial society, his disciple Victor Turner was prepared to apply liminality - at least in a metaphorical sense - to 'cultural phenomena of leisure in industrial or post industrial societies' (1978:286). In this vein, Judy Little, in *Comedy and the Woman Writer* (1983) suggests that women authors frequently perceive themselves as "'outsiders" (persons assigned to the threshold of a world not theirs)' (6) and that they manifest the distinctive features of inversion, communal festivity, mockery and redefinition of sexual identity.

It is against the background of van Gennep's research and Little's thesis that I would describe Sonia as a narrator who exploits her liminal position to subversive effect. As an unemployed, state-dependent divorcee, she is already in a crucial public sense 'betwixt and between'. Furthermore, in a personal sense, she knows that her admiration of Natalie notwithstanding, she is no more than a bit player in the protagonist's life. Sonia's marginality is confirmed when her action of igniting the float leads to her being committed to an asylum. She is yet another Weldonian

narrator - like Jocelyn in *Down Among the Women*, like Praxis - who has committed a crime and now speaks from an uncertain and unenviable position on the sidelines.

This motif in Weldon's fiction - the criminal as narrator - is not universally admired. 'Ms Weldon can be accused not only of repeating herself but also, worse still, of actually imitating herself', asserts Stanley Reynolds in his review of *The Heart of the Country* (1987:25). This 'damned She-Devil business' is Reynolds's only reservation in recommending the novel for the 1987 Booker prize. However, Weldon's madwomen, her female outcasts and miscreants, engender narratives whose moral thrust is mischievously undermined by their eccentric source, and which are consequently both tendentious and highly entertaining.

Sonia's liminality lends her narrative a playfully disobedient quality. Her comic and colloquial voice is literally irrepressible. She immediately breaks the convention of distance by addressing us in a chatty, conversational tone that assumes a shared universe:

You know what those mornings are, just before the rain sets in? (1)

Mind you, I'm not surprised the Harris household was in trouble. (3)

Nor has she any qualms about anticipating her story, thus contravening the rule of temporal sequence. Sonia cheerfully destabilizes the reading process, informing us that 'by the end of the story - or as much of it as I'm in a position to tell - Natalie was looking less like a heroine and more like a call girl' (4). Before we have even reached the day of the carnival, Sonia reveals that 'last year someone burned to death on the WAEADA float, and I it was (well, and Ros) who set the float on fire' (85). She begins her narrative in an attempt at the third person (referring to herself as Sonia), but immediately adopts a highly personal, colloquial discourse littered with expressions such as 'not everyone's cup of tea' and 'well and truly in the shit' (1). She maintains her distance to some extent through Chapter 1, describing how

Natalie spatters Sonia with mud as she drives her children to a public school. But a little way into Chapter 2, Sonia gives vent to her indignation:

Rot you, I said to Natalie. Rich bitch! Rot you. I, Sonia, cursed her. (17)

In a brilliantly witty twist, the third person turns out to be a therapy invented by her psychiatrist, who has instructed Sonia to 'objectivize' herself, to see herself as others see her, 'that is to say in the third person' (17). She vows to soldier on, referring to herself as 'Sonia', but a few pages later slips her strait-jacket and complains that 'to practise 'objectivity', to third-personalize ... may well reduce the ego, but it doesn't half fracture one's sense of continuing identity, already seriously threatened' (29). Although she manages, for the most part, to maintain the illusion of distance, she has blown her cover. Consequently, the explanation that 'Sonia didn't eat more than anyone else' (27), and the comment, 'Sonia was a good sort' (174), sound a little like special pleading.<sup>11</sup>

Sonia's narrative strategy has the effect of questioning the predominance of logic and objective distance. She reduces epistemology to informed guesswork and, at one point, having relayed Natalie's thoughts, she answers an imagined question:

You wonder how I know all this? What goes on in one woman's head goes pretty much on in another's .... (24)

The mockery of the third person and the ridicule of the narrator's epistemological prerogatives give rise to a type of metafictional bantering. For instead of the conventional narrator of a third-person text, upon whose considered, rational judgement we can rely, in *The Heart of the Country* we are reduced to trusting a guide whose sanity is in question, simply because she is the only guide. A further metafictional joke is introduced when interpolations by Sonia's psychiatrist give rise to the suspicion that the narrative is being monitored:

'Can't your husband mend the car?' asked Sonia ....  
 'No,' said Natalie.  
 'What do you keep him for then?' asked Sonia. That was the joke. (Shall we consider anti-male humour and what we are really trying to say when we indulge in it?: shrink) (55-6)

Sonia's control waivers towards the end as she increasingly calls for pills to complete her tale. She is sufficiently distracted to have to ask, 'Where did I leave Natalie?' (147). Her quirky charm inspires her psychiatrist, Dr Mempton, to propose. Sonia, of course, refuses.

The undermining of all fictional conventions is complete when a battle for copyright develops between author and narrator. Sonia claims that she is 'going to write on, and then smuggle the manuscript out of here and get it to a publisher' (54). As if to put paid to these ambitions, the novel is signed 'Fay Weldon/Mid October 1986' (199).

The internal debate about the origins of *The Heart of the Country* became externalized after publication. Reviewers were perplexed about its relationship to the television series which was broadcast simultaneously. Stanley Reynolds raises a number of objections:

With a most suspicious speed Fay Weldon's new novel is transferring this very night to the box in the sitting-room.... Was Fay Weldon asked to do the TV series first? And if she was, does it not mean that there is something second-rate about this new novel - most of us, after all, possess sentimental notions of the novelist sitting in a room of his or her own, writing for the printed page. We consider it, and quite rightly, a higher art form than the telly. If Ms Weldon has cashed in on some sort of unholy alliance between publisher and television, does it not make her a little suspect? (1987:44)

*The Heart of the Country*, produced for BBC2 in 1986, stars the matronly Susan Penhaligon as Natalie Harris, the tomboyish Jacqueline Tong as Sonia and the winsome Rosalind Bennett as Flora. This casting highlights the differences among the novel's female characters, adding piquancy to their collaboration at the denouement. Furthermore, the medium of television is particularly well-suited to exposing Britain's petty middle-class materialism, and in the series Natalie is exquisitely portrayed as the victim of a prevailing economic order. The novel, on the other hand, manages the tale of Sonia, her vengeance and her punishment, much more pungently. This is not surprising, given the nature of first-person narration. The point that needs to be made in Weldon's defence is that when adapting her own

work, she *is* aware of the different capacities of the media she deals with, and cannot thus be accused of reproducing herself. Cara Chanteau, confirming that the series came first, is more sensitive to Weldon's versatility:

This is a novel which grew out of a television script for a series of the same name, now 'in the can' and poised in the spring schedules to garner the kind of success that greeted *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. In that case the novel came first; but Ms Weldon appears equally at ease adapting in either direction. (It was to escape the constraints of television writing that she took to novels in the first place.) With *The Heart of the Country*, she has said, the input of the actors and director actually enriched the resulting novel.

(1987:28)

*The Heart of the Country*, with its mixture of superstition, stern moral disapprobation, carnival and social realism, its mad, self-reflexive narrator and its multi-media author, fits perfectly Charles Jencks's definition of Post-Modern art:

Its best works are characteristically doubly-coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism.

(7)

Unlike other works of fiction which fall within the definition of Postmodernism, the playfulness in Weldon's oeuvre seldom has the effect of alienating the reader. Although eager to experiment stylistically, Weldon does not abandon plot or create an epistemological maze; in this sense her work could never match the difficulty of, for example, Thomas Pynchon's novels. The possible reasons for her reluctance to take her self-reflexive theme to its logical conclusion must include a degree of commercialism. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Weldon has been increasingly accused (from *The Heart of the Country* onwards) of writing for financial gain rather than from purely artistic or even political motives. There is nothing particularly surprising about this, given the fact that Weldon's career began with the single mother's imperative to earn, and television and advertising are the obvious routes to financial independence. Reynolds's preference (quoted above) for the 'higher art form' produced by a writer secluded from the world and its dealings

seems at first extremely elitist, but there is an inescapable connection between Weldon's worldly success and literary failure, which we can begin to see in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*.

*The Hearts and Lives of Men* is recognisably an 'airport' novel, thick and packed with action, including one plane crash and a hijacking attempt. It was written in 46 episodes for *Woman* magazine before being published by Heinemann. This accounts for the characteristic cliffhanger effect at the end of chapters, the proliferation of dramatic events, and not least for its length (the paperback is 395 pages long).

Little Nell, heroine of *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, is well named: her innocent Odyssey has a Dickensian quality.<sup>12</sup> Her many comic escapes from death call to mind Oscar Wilde's quip about needing a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell. And with a Dickensian attention to setting, Weldon's narrator begins by recreating the carefree atmosphere of the 1960s into which little Nell, in the absence of sophisticated birth control, is born:

Back in the sixties! What a time that was! When everyone wanted everything, and thought they could have it, and what's more had a right to it. Marriage, and freedom within it. Sex without babies. Revolution, without poverty. Careers, without selfishness. Art, without effort. Knowledge, without learning by rote. Dinner, in other words, and no washing up. 'Why don't we do it in the road?' they cried. Why not?

(5)

The battle for custody of the charming Nell (between her father, fine arts dealer Clifford Wexford, and her mother Helen, daughter of the eccentric artist John Lally), sets off a bizarre chain of events. Clifford's underhand scheme to kidnap his daughter and bring her to his Swiss office backfires. The plane crash in which Nell supposedly dies actually launches the little girl into a series of perilous adventures. Divorce, custody battle, kidnapping, plane crash, hijacking: the novel is nothing if not topical, but this is topicality gone awry. Elements of the novel seem to have been lifted straight from the newspapers for their thrill value rather than to any

enduring literary purpose. The result is momentarily diverting rather than subversive: we are interested in Nell's precarious fate but, for all its extraordinary events, we are unlikely to find the novel unsettling.

Each successive home she goes to exploits Nell's talents and goodwill. In a final irony, she is employed at a minimal wage by her own mother - now a successful dress designer - on her eventual return to London. Perhaps most exploited of all is Nell's grandfather, John Lally, whose artistic output is controlled by Clifford's firm, Leonardo's, in exchange for a miserly stipend. The contrast between the calculating eye of these purveyors of fine art, and the slightly crazed imagination of a true artist, results in the following comical inventory:

- (1) *Beached Whale With Vultures* - damaged
- (2) *Massacre of the Turtles* in fine condition
- (3) *St Peter and Cripple at Heaven's Gate* - scratched
- (4) *The Feast of Eyes* - stained (coffee?)
- (5) *Kitten with Hand* - stained (bird droppings)
- (6) *Dead Flowerpiece* (in fine condition)
- (7) *Landscape of Bones* (slashed)
- (8) *Fox Plus Chicken Pieces* (remnant) (53)

Weldon makes much of the artistic talent which Nell has inherited from Lally, and which ultimately leads her back to her mother. Not only is Nell's genetic heritage enumerated, but her astrological chart is supplied, preparing us for the narrator's near obsession with destiny:

Fate would allow her some small pleasant respite, then whirl her up and set her down on an altogether different and not necessarily pleasant path. Good fortune and bad were always, for Nell, to follow close upon each other's heels, and snapping at hers. (170)

The narrator is true to her word. Nell survives, *inter alia*, her mother's intention to abort her, a kidnap attempt, a plane crash and the threat of child prostitution. She is adopted by an ancient French couple whose dabblings in black magic ignite an inferno from which Nell is delivered by a servant who dies in a car accident. Nell once again emerges unscathed, but her inability to speak English results in her

classification as 'educationally sub-normal' (206) and her placement at the infamous Eastlake Assessment Centre. At this point Nell's survival skills rather than sheer luck come into play. Her subsequent escape from the Centre (pursued by vicious dogs), and her adoption by the benign criminals, Clive and Polly, are evidence of this resourcefulness. On Faraway Farm (the hideout), Nell's inherited artistic talent comes to the fore. Her hand-dyed and embroidered materials impress her mother's firm sufficiently for them to take her on. Nell uses up her eighth life when she accompanies her biological family on a trip to New York, and the arch villain Erich Blotton (her erstwhile kidnapper) attempts to hijack the plane. The true connections between the various characters (conveniently all aboard) are established, and the tale ends happily.

The sheer momentum of the plot was probably maintained by writing each chapter only as it fell due. Stan Gebler Davies reminds us that

this was the habit of Dickens and Thackeray; it has the advantage that the author is paid at least twice for his, or her, efforts, but of course it takes guts to do it. Imagine having to invent a new fiction every week.

(1987:10-11)

But comparisons with the great realists proved unfortunate, as Weldon could hardly hope to live up to their impeccable standards of verisimilitude. Furthermore, Weldon's financial success was starting to be noticed; so, indeed, were her shortcomings. Collins paid her an advance of £450 000 for the British rights to the next three novels she wrote, and behind the criticisms levelled at her was the expectation that if she was going to be as successful as Dickens, she should at least get her facts right. In a witty review for *The Sunday Times*, Paul Johnson makes a rather unfair comparison between Jane Austen, Dickens and Flaubert on the one hand, and Weldon on the other. He identifies numerous factual errors in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, including her reference to a 'long-lost panel of Elgin marble' and her ignorance of the ingredients of a champagne cocktail:

The closing hours of El Vino's, the time-difference between London and Johannesburg and the principals of air travel insurance are other subjects on which Miss Weldon is ill-informed. (1987:14)

To Johnson's objections one could add Davies's surprise on discovering that 'Mrs Weldon ... thinks that Benjamin Franklin was a Victorian philosopher and scientist who electrocuted himself by flying a kite' (1987:11) and Kossick's footnote pointing out that Sidney Poitier (not Harry Belafonte) was the star of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1989:34). Though frequently praised for its inventiveness, Weldon's fiction tends recently to blur the important distinction between fiction and factual inaccuracy. A brief comparison of *The Hearts and Lives of Men* with *The Shrapnel Academy* will reveal how what was once a subversive technique begins to look more like authorial ineptness.

To the narrator of *The Shrapnel Academy* - a novel which contains factual data and fantastic incident in equal measure - it is important that the reader admits the occasional conflation of the two realms. 'You know what fiction is; it will keep bursting over into real life, and vice versa' (10) is the introductory 'reminder'. *The Shrapnel Academy* was praised when Weldon visited a Nuclear Research Plant, vindicating her ability to synthesize factual data when it suits her. She told Shirley Kossick in their interview that the scientists there had informed her that she 'had only made one mistake' in the novel pertaining to weaponry. And there is no doubt that Weldon is fully in control of both factual and fictional worlds in *The Shrapnel Academy*.

In *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, Weldon's narrator stoutly defends the veracity of her tale:

This story of mine follows real life pretty closely - which is why it may at times seem far-fetched: ask yourself, isn't truth even more unbelievable than fiction? Don't the headlines which greet you every day, in your daily newspaper, speak of the most extraordinary and unlikely events?

(205)

Clearly, Weldon is here aspiring to perform that transformation of reality which Tom Wolfe describes in his introduction to *The Bonfire of the Vanities*:

The imagination of the novelist is powerless before what he knows he's going to read in tomorrow morning's newspaper. But a generation of American writers has drawn precisely the wrong conclusion from that perfectly valid observation. The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists, but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms.

(1987:xxviii)

Of course, Wolfe is not suggesting that the novelist should employ all the bizarre incidents reported daily in her creation of a single character's life. Unlike Wolfe's scathing satire of contemporary American life, and in a departure from her own darkly humorous view of society's aggressive underbelly, Weldon here fails to 'wrestle the beast and bring it to terms'. In sum, the broad canvas which Weldon has borrowed from a Victorian tradition of penny weeklies, and across which she charts the journey of little Nell, does not take its literary heritage seriously enough. Although Nell's fantastic itinerary and her survival in the face of all the evils the world can muster are entertaining, the byzantine plot lacks a narrator who can compare with the all-knowing nineteenth-century oracle. The narrator of *The Hearts and Lives of Men* is outspoken and flagrantly inconsistent. Though this at first seems a typical Weldonian ploy, the novel ultimately suffers from the unadulterated flippancy of its narrative voice.

The biting wit that was once so memorably directed (by Jocelyn, Praxis and Sonia) at a whole range of iniquitous social practices devolves, in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, into a series of gratuitous *bons mots* uttered occasionally and inconsequentially by an inveterate socialite. The most persistent trait of the latter individual is her assumption that the reader is as *au fait* with the social whirl of 1960s London as she is. After all, 'with [her] first husband' (7) she attended the

party where Clifford and Helen met. Rather than narrating, she gossips. If Clifford's appearance is of interest to the reader, 'you will see his photographs in *Art World* and *Connoisseur*' (10); moreover, his residence 'changed hands recently for half a million pounds' (81). The omniscience of a narrator who quotes her hairdresser as a reliable source of information can hardly be credited. Her vulnerability is confirmed when an apparent loneliness causes her to solicit our responses with questions such as 'Perhaps you know it' (58), 'Remember?' (90), and 'Xmas day 1978. What were you doing, reader?' (287). Yet she hardly inspires pity, since she is irrelevant to the action, a mere chatterbox. She is also decidedly squeamish, an unusual characteristic for a narrator. She apologizes fastidiously for the fact that Helen and Clifford sleep together on their first encounter, finds the juncture at which Helen learns of the plane crash 'too terrible' (137) to dwell on, and is unnerved by her own description of the practice of black magic.

It is a very unorthodox and unwise procedure in narrative studies to identify a narrator as the author herself, but to some extent, this is the conclusion that must be drawn. Only an author could struggle to remember what she cooked for Christmas dinner in 1978, while happily pinpointing the exact moment at which her protagonist was conceived. This voice (for want of a better definition) is much given to tangential interpolations on topics ranging from abortion to the effect of surprises, suggesting that here Weldon is mimicking herself. Nevertheless Terence Rafferty urges, in the midst of this authorial bombardment, that we acknowledge her *esprit*:

She's such a *cheerful* manipulator, flaunting her omniscience and her omnipotence so shamelessly that they turn into jokes: even she can't quite believe how much power we're willing to grant her in our pursuit of entertainment. (1988:67)

Rafferty here unwittingly identifies the pitfall in Weldon's prose style: a tendency to self-serving rather than tendentious wit. It was Freud, in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, who first noted that

[t]he motive force for the production of innocent jokes is not infrequently an ambitious urge to show one's cleverness, to display oneself - an instinct that may be equated with exhibitionism in the sexual field.

(1905:143)

In an 'innocent' joke, according to Freud, 'the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim', whereas a joke that *does* have an aim 'becomes tendentious' (1905:90). The humour in much of Fay Weldon's early fiction is highly tendentious, a deflating and even occasionally castrating wit that takes few prisoners. But towards the end of the 1980s, Weldon's work moves out of the field of purely feminist interest. As with the peripheral (occasionally diverting but more often irritating) narrator of *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, Weldon's comic style becomes the sugar-coated shell encasing otherwise unremarkable narratives. From feminist humour - which is in a very important sense about self-preservation - the novelist descends to the narcissistic wit described by Freud. Given the high stakes involved, this shift to 'innocent' comedy might conceivably have had its origins in the complaint by marketing experts that her fiction was 'insufficiently targeted at male buyers' (Davies, 1987: 10). Whether it is the comforting knowledge that she is now a financially successful author, or an over-confidence bred of having written prolifically, Weldon's novels in recent years are facetious rather than astringent, and diffusely topical rather than pointedly satirical.

## Endnotes

1. My sources are:  
Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (1911);  
Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905);  
Marleen S. Barr, "'Laughing in Liberating Defiance": Egalia's daughters and Feminist Tendentious Humor', in *Discontented Discourses: feminism, textual intervention, psychoanalysis* (1989);  
Judith Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer* (1983);  
Jaye Berman, 'Women's Humor', in *Contemporary Literature* XXXI, 2, 1990.
2. These are:
  1. Regina Barreca (ed.), *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*. Unfortunately, Regina Barreca's book *Fay Weldon's Wicked Fictions* (1994), which sounds most pertinent, was not available at the time of completing this study.
  2. Candace Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*.
  3. Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*.
  4. Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner (eds), *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*.
  5. Linda A. Morris, *Women Vernacular Humorists in Nineteenth-Century America: Ann Stephens, Frances Whitcher and Marietta Holley*.
3. Cixous, in celebrating the capacity of women to express their own excess, invokes similar images of rupture:

I ... overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again ... I have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst - burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. (1976: 876)
4. Originally translated as *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*.
5. *Women's Studies* (1988), vol 15, 305-311.
6. *Upstairs, Downstairs* was, in the words of *Longman's Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1992):

a British television series of the 1970s about a wealthy family who live in their London home with their servants during the early 1900s.

(1447)

More to the point, the series was a witty period satire on class differences.

7. Lord Byron, 'The Destruction of Sennacherib'.
8. Passing reference to mysterious deaths acts as a solemn reminder of the conspiracy of silence that protects business and industry from moral blame. Natalie's father, for example,
 

had died of bone cancer: nothing to do, the authorities swore, with the fact that he was on the maintenance side of the airforce business, and his speciality the nuclear missile-carrying capacity of conventional aircraft.

(20)

Similarly Bernard's father, who had worked for thirty-five years for a linoleum firm, developed cancer of the lungs but 'was fired (before he had time to make a connection between inhaling fumes and his illness) on the grounds that he'd been pilfering' (137).

9. For Weldon, cooking and eating the dog might be said to have become a subversive motif.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin refers to the 'carnivalisation' (1981:241) of literature and maintains that subversive writing - which overturns hierarchy and mocks authority - owes much to the essentially popular social phenomenon of carnival.
11. Sonia's partisan approach affects her description of the men in Natalie's life. Recounting Harry Harris's departure, Sonia cannot resist an echo of Dorothy Parker's famous riposte to the news of President Herbert Hoover's death ('How could they tell?'):

how did his wife *know* he hadn't come home? I mean, could she *tell*?

(3)

12. Little Nell Trent, parodied in the figure of the incorruptible Nell in Weldon's text, is the heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841).

## Chapter Five

*The Rules of Life* (1987)  
*Leader of the Band* (1988)  
*The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989)  
*Darcy's Utopia* (1990)  
*Growing Rich* (1992)  
*Life Force* (1992)  
*Affliction* (1993)

It is difficult to account for the apparent falling off of Fay Weldon's literary skills, nor is it a pleasant task to have to end a thesis on a negative note. A veteran of popular fiction, journalism and television, and above all a thoroughly public person, Fay Weldon is in some ways perfectly placed to write *the* English novel of this century's closing decade, and may indeed go on to do so. Though some reviewers have implied that Weldon's writing formula has grown stale and may have caused her decline, I will argue, in this concluding section, that it is where she has failed to apply her formula that her reputation has faltered. By contrasting Weldon's latest work with her earlier, undisputed successes, I hope to show how her finest work is formulaic in the best sense of the word and that in her eager courtship of a broader readership she has lost her literary footing. Whatever her current value may be

among critics, reviewers and readers, the fact remains that Weldon has been to the second half of the twentieth century something like what Arnold Bennett was to the first: a prolific novelist of the times, popular rather than esteemed, a journalist in the hallowed halls of fiction, to be respected as much for sheer hard work as for the exercise of imagination.

A quick glance at the titles and essential subject matter of the recent novels with which this thesis is concerned does not immediately suggest a flagging of creativity, energy or originality: *The Rules of Life* (1987), *Leader of the Band* (1988), *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), *Darcy's Utopia* (1990), *Growing Rich* (1992), *Life Force* (1992), *Affliction* (1993), *Splitting* (1995).<sup>1</sup> These titles by no means fall into the category of Barbara Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter*, voted by Philip Hensher as the century's worst 'for sheer failure to allure' (1994:64).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the novels are rich in topical reference, as if the author had sought to keep up to date, even trendy. *The Rules of Life* hints at colonies of quarantined AIDS sufferers; the Great New Fictional Religion and the Great Screenwriter In The Sky which feature in this novel may even be a witty reflection on current postmodernist theorizing,<sup>3</sup> and Gabriella's account of her moment of death accords with newly popular descriptions of near-death experiences.<sup>4</sup> In *Leader of the Band* and *The Cloning of Joanna May* Weldon's interest in the latest gene technology is evident.<sup>5</sup> The latter novel is set in 1986, the year of Chernobyl, and Carl May's death by radiation is a grim reference to the ills of the nuclear power industry. A collection of short stories, *Moon Over Minneapolis* (1991), includes 'A Visit From Johannesburg' in which fears are voiced that now 'Mandela was free ... all hell [was] about to break out' (45).<sup>6</sup> *Darcy's Utopia*, if Kate Saunders is to be believed, reflects Weldon's membership of Harold Pinter's salon of writers who all produced 'polemical state-of-the-nation fictions'.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly in fact, topicality was becoming Fay Weldon's bread and butter. *Growing Rich* (1992) hints at scandal in the upper social echelons; also in 1992 she published a tongue-in-cheek tabloid article on NONCs (Noble Order of New Celibacy),<sup>8</sup> and in 1993 her radio play about the

ozone layer, 'The Hole in the Top of the World' (starring Walter Matthau) was acclaimed by *Plays and Players* as 'a marvellously produced piece of drama'.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, in her 1993 interview with Shirley Kossick, Weldon declared her awareness, in each work she embarks upon, of a conscious attempt to do something new. There is certainly nothing received about the idea of a dissatisfied corpse imparting laundry tips to the spindly priest of a latterday fictional religion under the guise of great spiritual truths, or *The Rules of Life*. A plot in which a successful childless lady astronomer, product of a Nazi genetic experiment, experiences a mid-forties flush of sexual enthusiasm for a 'well-hung' trumpet-player (the Leader of the Band), may have its tawdry aspects, but could not be said to lack potential. The eerie account of a vindictive nuclear power mogul revenging his wife's infidelity by having her cloned is nothing if not diverting. The 'Utopia' propounded by Eleanor Darcy (originally christened 'Apricot' after the colour of her mother's brushed nylon nightie) is not the feminist ideal traditionally associated with feminist writers. Nevertheless an entirely idiosyncratic and dotty society, in which class differences will be ironed out by elocution lessons and money will flow freely from autobanks, is an entertaining prospect. In the deathly dull East Anglia town of Fenedge, a disabled narrator witnesses the seduction of a reluctant schoolgirl (who is growing rich) by the devil (complete with black BMW and chauffeur's outfit): the tale has intriguingly Faustian possibilities. The attempt to capture in print the elusive 'Life Force', as it is - putatively - embodied in a 'vast-penised' philanderer who beds four female friends, is perhaps a little ambitious. Finally, a full-frontal attack on astrological psychotherapy delivered entirely through the medium of dialogue is, surely, both timeous and original.<sup>10</sup>

With all these fresh and potentially provocative ideas, what went wrong? Why do Weldon's reviews now range only from faint praise to outright condemnation? What shortcoming has inspired the following remarks:

It does not work. The ... book slips into self-indulgence while the ending falters. As the priest says: 'Praise be the Great Screen Writer In The Sky -

press Play and Record' - or in this case, stop/eject.

(Ken Vernon, reviewing *The Rules of Life* in *The Star* 'Tonight!', 1993: 5)

Whatever it is, it's not nice. The book isn't nice but full of fucking, both act and word..... And yet...creative energy *is* here. The book buzzes and zings like Sandra's private parts. ... It's half yuck, and half wonderful.

(Carole Angier, reviewing *Leader of the Band* in *New Statesman* 1988:38)

Parts of *Darcy's Utopia* are as witty and clever as anything in the Weldon canon, but as a whole, it is too convoluted to hang together as a successful novel.

(Kate Saunders in *Literary Review*, 1990:16)

... her last few novels no longer seem to reach out to her natural constituents in the way the earlier ones did. ... Where, in the old days, it was the voice of anarchic cruelty shaking and driving characters to torment or success, now it seems to obliterate the characters under a deluge of superiority and manipulation. ... in *Growing Rich* our three girls cringe limply beneath life's exigencies....

(Harriet Waugh, *The Spectator*, 1992: 34)

But where is the master's touch, the sparkling prose and the wit of the short stories, the black comedy of *She-Devil*, the wisdom of *Praxis*? .... *Life Force* is a dreary little narrative about a group of women friends who have all slept with the same man ....

(Wendy Brandmark, *Literary Review*, 1992: 33-4)

As this thesis has consistently maintained that it is Fay Weldon's subversive narrative strategy that engages the reader, whips up critical controversy and distinguishes her work from that of her contemporaries, any discussion of Weldon's decline needs to begin with her (by now) infamous narrators. From the melancholy

Joycelyn and Praxis (with their equivocal crimes against infants) to the delightfully demonic Ruth and the rebellious Sonia, Weldon's protagonist-narrators have persistently declared themselves to be authors. In a favourite metafictional twist, we are left holding a text 'written' by one of the characters within it. Weldon's most recent novels have not departed from this tradition. Interestingly, her protagonists are always neophyte writers, as if Weldon were reluctant to describe the most obvious fact of her own life: writing experience. Unfortunately, the claim to inexperience on the part of her narrators has increasingly become all too believable. Starlady Sandra announces that she feels free to use author's license since *Leader of the Band* is her 'first novel'(41). As if to confirm her claims to authorship, two of her short stories are attached as appendices to the novel.<sup>11</sup> An acknowledgement alerts us to the fact that Weldon has actually already published these stories in magazines. As a postmodernist joke, this is a little heavy-handed (the stories would, quite frankly, have been more illuminating if they had been putatively written by Praxis) compared to the tense but implicit battle for copyright between Weldon and Sonia at the end of *The Heart of the Country*.

*Darcy's Utopia* is also not lacking in structural complexity and similarly consists of several texts: Eleanor Darcy, whose husband (the now jailed ex vice-chancellor of Bridport University) convinced 10 Downing Street that dispensing an endless stream of cash from High Street autobanks was a way of solving the country's financial crisis, is interviewed by Hugo Vansitart. Eleanor, who is now propounding her own Utopia in which one's neighbours will decide whether one is fit to be a parent, is also interviewed by Valerie Jones, who is writing Eleanor's biography, *The Lover at the Gate*, the text of which is serialized in *Darcy's Utopia*. Weldon's Protean narrator treats us to Valerie's first-person reflections as well as to her own third-person comments, confusing the issue utterly by saying things like 'I suppose' and 'I daresay'.<sup>12</sup>

Weldon's fiction has constantly experimented with the possibility of incorporating the direct, spoken voice; *Female Friends* and *Remember Me*, for

example, present unmediated dialogue in script form. As we shall see, however, when Weldon finally excludes the third- or even first-person framework, it is not a success. In *Darcy's Utopia* she comes close to this dramatic technique, using the clever device of a narrative that largely presents itself as the transcript of a recorded interview. Weldon told Shirley Kossick that she can 'never resist' an interview, an admission which reflects not egotism so much as a desire to express, and possibly influence, opinion. Certainly her fictional creation, Eleanor Darcy, shares this eagerness to grant an audience. Eleanor is much given to the shocking generalisation and self-invented truism: secular philosophising is her game. By creating Darcy, Weldon gives herself free rein to do what she's always had to do in interpolations: hold forth. This Eleanor Darcy does most freely, on money, love, drinking hours and democracy (which mustn't work or 'we're all in the soup' [86]).

The mysteriously paralysed narrator of *Growing Rich*<sup>13</sup> stretches our credulity by asserting that her apparently omniscient knowledge of her young neighbours in Landsfield Crescent - Carmen, Annie, Laura - comes entirely from her housebound observations. When she is miraculously cured at the end of the novel, she loses her disability allowance and reflects how she would have to 'find a job, or write a novel: something' (249). Nora, our narrator in *Life Force*, is quite right to note gloomily that her office job is 'quiet enough to let me get on with writing this unpublishable work' (12). *Affliction* does not portray itself as a fiction at all (it is almost exclusively dialogue), but its afflicted heroine, Annette, is the author of a New Age novel of marital dissension, *Lucifette Fallen*.

Weldon's narrators seem to enjoy authorship as much as she does. They do not merely tell their stories, they extemporize, filling every imaginable gap in the narrative with their anarchical chatter. As contemporary feminist linguistics has shown, women are simultaneously associated with garrulousness (gossip, storytelling, diary writing), and silence (they are seldom heard from pulpit or podium).<sup>14</sup> Weldon's narrators are irrepressibly noisy. They present hearsay as if it were fact, they draw maxims from jokes, they make lists, speeches, and asides. If necessary,

they speak from the dead. All this amounts to a profound mockery of speech and particularly of the authority associated with enunciation. From 'authority' it is a short step to 'authorship'. As an adjunct to this talkativeness, Weldon's narrators are all self-proclaimed authors. And as authors, they use the privileges of omniscience and authorial control to parody authoritative structures in society in general. If Weldon's writing women are partial, unpredictable and solipsistic, how much more so is the world they inhabit.

In this babble of voices lies one of Weldon's most subversive strategies, yet one which may, ironically, have something to do with her slipping standards. While the typical cacophony of, say, *Remember Me*, foregrounds the voices of wronged women, the endless telephone conversations of *Affliction* have the net result of transferring readerly sympathy to Annette's husband. The constant chatter of her narrators is effective only so long as it is self-conscious, that is, aware of precisely why silence must be avoided. The question arises, of course, whether Weldon herself has not been too 'talkative', if not in the sense of giving interviews, then insofar as her prolific output is concerned. She has always succeeded when her words have had the cumulative effect of a battering ram. She fails when she is wordy without being polemical, when her texts do not storm bastions.

Clearly, the impetus to narrative experimentation and metafictional exercise is still present in Weldon's more recent fiction. A closer examination of the narrative positions, however, points to an incipient lethargy. It is not by chance that Weldon's novels of the 1990s are narrated from coffin (Gabriella Sumpter in *The Rules of Life*), marital or extra-marital bed (Annette in *Affliction*; Sandra in *Leader of the Band*), sofa (Eleanor in *Darcy's Utopia*), wheelchair (*Growing Rich*), and office desk (Nora in *Life Force*). The sheer energy that characterized her earlier narrators - arsonists, asylum inmates, ex-convicts, restless spirits and she-devils to a woman - has gone, and Weldon's oeuvre has become, quite literally, sedentary, not to say supine.

In Chapter One I reflected on the economic oppression of women, and how

Weldon used that very poverty (which mirrored her own indigence as a single mother and aspirant writer) to inspire the indignation of *Down Among the Women*. But Starlady Sandra and Eleanor Darcy are cushioned by wealth; Gabriella Sumpter becomes a kept woman; even Hattie Upton is protected from hardship by a benevolent state that establishes centres for the 'Otherly Aabled' (241) and supplies them with drivers (albeit erratic and geriatric ones). Could it be that the further Weldon herself gets from earlier struggles, the less hard her protagonists have to try?

Two of Fay Weldon's most compelling narrators must surely be Ruth and Sonia (in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *The Heart of the Country* respectively). Abandoned by their husbands, they set about achieving a sweet and carnivalesque revenge. That is to say, they wreak most satisfying havoc in the lives of the men who have offended them, and having thus weakened the enemy, they empower themselves. As a consequence, their narratives have a fascinating potency, an inexorable and strangely pleasurable logic. Given our memory of Ruth's near incineration of suburbia and her painstaking belittlement of the fortuitously-named Bobbo, it is somewhat bathetic to turn to Weldon's recent fictional offerings where 'any man, cries the woman ... is better than none' (*LB*: 68). No wonder Carole Angier, reviewing *Leader of the Band*, complains that 'Fay Weldon has thrown a lot away ... to release her own creative energy. Mainly she's thrown away feminism' (1988:38).

The argument that Fay Weldon has rejected feminism has the advantage of explaining her recent predilection for female characters chronically dependent on stereotyped figures of male virility. Once the objects of Weldon's highly amusing and coruscating satire, traditional sexual relationships (ardent male, passive or infatuated female) are now to be taken seriously. One thinks wistfully of General Leo Makeshift, who feared his buxom mistress would bounce too enthusiastically on the old four-poster, 'with each bounce a cloud of dust arising, and himself wheezing and huffing' (*SA*: 58); or of the spinster English teacher Miss Leonard, who went streetwalking and consequently did not know who had impregnated her, 'the father

... the son ... or the American' (*PX*: 79); or of Ruth allowing the judge to cane her naked behind with a carpet beater while she urges him - successfully - to lengthen Bobbo's jail sentence (*S-D*: 150). In the later novels, though, sex is not so funny. Starlady Sandra, we are to believe, 'will live in a van to the end of her days, if that is what Jack the mad trumpeter decrees' (125). Gabriella Sumpter, the voice from beyond the grave in *The Rules of Life*, is entirely preoccupied with men and laundry, the former usually necessitating the latter. Yet when the entranced priest of the GNFR (Great New Fictional Religion) who has listened to her tale makes discreet enquiries, he discovers that Gabriella's married lover viewed her, at best, as a slightly batty sideshow. There is a moment in *Darcy's Utopia*, however, when Weldon's gift for sexual mockery returns. Apricot - later Ellen, later Eleanor - attempts, aged 17, to seduce a candidate for the priesthood, and the resultant role-reversal is delectably farcical:

'Look, look, my mother's ghost!' cried Apricot, pointing, though there was nothing there, or hardly anything, just a warning shimmer in the air outside Rhoda's bedroom. Bernard looked up and Apricot made a dive to undo his zip. He shook her off and made his way, groping through a dark lit only by the red light of the fish-tank heater, to the front door and out into the street and away. 'I didn't think you were that kind of girl,' he said, 'and I shan't see you again...'

(64)

It is this subversive sense of humour which - regrettably - is found less and less often in Weldon's novels of the 1990s. The sheer indignation that inspired the scintillatingly witty vitriol of her first fictions may well have abated with financial security on a personal level and, more generally, as some of the worst abuses of patriarchy were ameliorated. According to her interview with Melvyn Bragg, this was a conscious departure for her:

I began to write out of indignation. It just burst upon me as it burst upon the world that all was not well. With women. Yes, part of it certainly was propaganda. I thought that in a male-oriented world the woman was repressed. Many more writers are doing it now. I've gone into a much more

literary, less polemical area.

(London *Sunday Times*, 1984: 24)

Nevertheless it has to be admitted that rejecting repression by turning the world upside down has always been the fort  of her most inspired characters. There is Praxis, who sees prostitution as a kindly duty, but marriage as a form of prostitution; and Ruth, who uses the energy unleashed by her hatred to upend every institution of society, but who resorts to a leg-shortening operation so that she can at last look up to men. And, in *The Heart of the Country* there is Sonia, who chooses arson, certification and life on a rubbish tip with an unemployed youth rather than succumb to the ill-gotten comforts of patriarchal businessmen. The antics of these spirited and rebellious women are so much more engaging than the tame, almost crushed response of Joanna (who spies on her evil ex-husband only by proxy while accepting his appalling incursions into her life and privacy) or Carmen (who puts up a genteel resistance to the devil's overtures but soon finds she has a soft spot for Bernard Bellamy anyway). But it is Annette, the heroine of the most recent novel, *Affliction*, who provides the most extreme contrast to Fay Weldon's harridans.

Annette (a fledgling writer) discovers that her marriage to Spicer is jeopardized by the counsel of his 'New Age homeopathic therapist astrologer'. She bows before Spicer's emotional blackmail, which he uses to prevent her publicising her novel (he thinks it is damningly biographical). Spicer inflicts a series of humiliations on his pregnant wife, which includes broadcasting her distressed telephone calls on his office intercom and forcing her into therapy with the psychiatrist husband of his own astrologer/lover. Driven nearly to suicide, Annette miscarries. Only a photograph she has discovered, of Spicer in a bizarre sexual triangle with the therapists, convinces her that she is the sane one. There is an anomalous interlude - reminiscent of more feisty Weldonian protagonists - in which Annette hitchhikes to Yorkshire, but she is brought back by her publisher and former lover, Ed, who marries her. The famous - at once subversive and didactic - Weldon voice is nowhere to be heard since the novel is presented entirely in the form of dialogue. This absence is particularly telling in the light of subsequent revelations

about the origins of *Affliction*:

Her latest novel *Affliction* placed Weldon at the centre of a storm of controversy when it was first released in Britain. Not least because of the comparable parallels in her own life..... Weldon's own marriage of 30 years collapsed after her husband Ron consulted a therapist who deduced from reading Fay's horoscope in a magazine that the couple were incompatible. He later moved in with the therapist.<sup>15</sup>

In one of those extraordinary coincidences that have occurred throughout Weldon's writing career,<sup>16</sup> she finds herself personally afflicted by a phenomenon of the very New Age that her fiction had always portrayed so sympathetically. The New Age movement rose to prominence in the 1980s. It consists of an eclectic array of beliefs and practices, all broadly spiritual in origin. The term New Age thus encompasses fields as diverse as ecology, feminism, self-help, astrology, holistic thinking, divination, tarot, zen, vegetarianism, reincarnation and healing. None of these ideas are new in themselves, but they were all subsumed into a *zeitgeist* precipitated by a worldwide resurgence of paganism.<sup>17</sup> One does not have to look far in Weldon's oeuvre for examples of New Age influence. *Puffball* reflects a mystical and naturopathic interest; *The Heart of the Country* introduces a strong environmental undercurrent; in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* we are furnished with little Nell's astrological chart; and the tarot features prominently in *The Cloning of Joanna May*. It may be Weldon's disenchantment with New Age notions (she wrote an article entitled 'Against Therapy', and has subsequently lectured on and debated the topic)<sup>18</sup> that makes *Affliction* the antithesis of *Leader of the Band*.<sup>19</sup> Where Starlady Sandra was a successful astronomer with a popular television programme who left her husband in order to indulge in highly energetic sex with a younger man, Annette is a timid, sexually repressed first-time author who takes charge of her life only once she is on the verge of losing it. It is sadly ironic, considering Weldon's fictional expertise on the theme of revenge, that she was unable to use her own possible personal bitterness and spite to a more impressive end. *Affliction* suffers,

too, from the fact that it is weak novel (albeit on an intriguing theme) that follows hard on the heels of a truly bad one.

Of all the novels under discussion, *Life Force* is without doubt the most disappointing. Marion (who has her own gallery, funded by the sale of her baby to childless and wealthy - naturally - South Africans), Rosalie, Susan and Nora have all at some time bedded or even wedded the flame-haired Leslie Beck. His last wife, Anita, has died, and negotiations over the posthumous sale of her paintings bring Leslie back into the ambit of his erstwhile paramours.<sup>20</sup> The novel consists of several excursions into the past: the reuniting of Marion with her strapping South African son, Nora's divorce and the return of Rosalie's husband (presumed dead on a mountaineering expedition) in the nick of time to save her from electrocution at the hands of her boyfriend.

Weldon has been such a prolific writer that she may not even be aware that she has written this novel before, only a much better version. *Female Friends* (1975) - discussed in Chapter One - follows the lives of three women, Marjorie, Grace and Chloe, who have all at one time slept with the auburn-haired Patrick Bates, two of them even bearing his children. Like Leslie Beck, Patrick Bates has IT, that mysterious 'special power' that 'has the mature ladies of the village in an erotic ferment and the young girls giddy with love' (*FF*: 72). As in the case of Leslie Beck, the narrator of *Female Friends* is at a loss to define this power, though more circumspectly she observes that it is 'not, one may be sure, the size of his member' (72). *Life Force*, on the other hand and as its title suggests, tries to pin IT down:

Leslie Beck's Life Force is the energy not so much of sexual desire as of sexual discontent: the urge to find someone better out there, and thereby something better in the self ... (13)

But as far as the reader is concerned, Leslie Beck possesses nothing so grand or auspicious. What he has, as the narrator reminds us *ad nauseum*, is an exceptionally

large 'cock, or dong, or dick, or willy, or whatever awed, affectionate, familiar or derisory word you choose to call it by' (85). Where *Down Among the Women* (1971), one of Weldon's earliest novels, was possessed of a castrating wit (Byzantia loses interest in Simeon 'the moment he actually manages to achieve an erection' [216 -7]), *Life Force* is given over to a rather tedious inflation. This is not least attributable to its dreary narrator.

Nora is almost the stereotypical bore: highly disorganized (and therefore digressive) yet absolutely determined to tell her story. Satirical or succinct she is not. This fact, combined with the inordinate space accorded to descriptions of Leslie Beck's 'dong', has embarrassing stylistic results. The following unfortunate (but perhaps apposite, given the subject matter) dangling modifier shows how Leslie Beck's excrescence interferes with the smooth flow of narrative:

Marion had seen it one morning, pushing open the bathroom door ... (65)

The former Weldon would not have been oblivious to this unfortunate phrasing. Perhaps the extinction of an alert self-consciousness, which this slip suggests, is an important element in Weldon's recent decline. Much of the subversive humour which this thesis has applauded is postmodernist in origin, that is, it avails itself of many freedoms, but always in a highly self-conscious manner. To break a rule without realizing the disruptive advantage of one's error is to fall sadly short of the witty, double-coded irony of postmodernism.

In the case of *Life Force*, Nora frankly lacks the savvy to comment on her story, still less on her own manner of telling it. The narrator protests in vain that the 'Life Force' is something ineffable and even numinous: the fact remains that we learn nothing about elixirs here. All we are privy to is mechanical acts of copulation, laughable in their contortions:

At first everything was rusty and creaky, like some oil drill that has been used so long it's seized up, but little by little the plunging and plucking

became easier and quicker and faster, as if the machinery was at last fulfilling its proper function.

(56)

Nora, who admits to being a beginner, is a particularly bad writer. She simply cannot cope with the demands of her own story. Instead, she increasingly resorts to explanations and reiterations as if aware that the characterization is flaccid:

I, if you remember, am Nora, married to Ed the publisher, and the one writing this book of an afternoon up at Accord Realtors. Marion Loos is the one who describes herself as a spinster, runs the art gallery, and sold her baby to get it going.

(24-25)

No wonder her reviewer was tempted to refer to 'Weldon, you know, the one who's far too interested in herself to spend much time on her characters'.<sup>21</sup> Nora must constantly usher us 'Back to ...' the locus of her story. This is not surprising considering her meandering interpolations and digressions on *Life in General*. When she tries to dignify her story by 'filming' it, that is, ascribing parts to Gerard Depardieu (Vinnie) or Glenn Close (Susan), her inexperience is highlighted. Given Weldon's expertise in the field of screenwriting, Nora's inept attempt to introduce cinematography leaves one nonplussed.

Weldon has so often invited the conflation of her own pervasive authorial voice with that of her loquacious first-person narrators (a device I have referred to as her ventriloquism) that critics have seldom troubled to distinguish Weldon from her own characters as far as narrative technique is concerned. This conflation has usually worked to Weldon's advantage, identifying the author with a range of vivacious, witty, unpredictable, human and yet paradoxically omniscient narrators who subvert every orthodoxy and convention of the reading process. Lorna Sage comments:

The voices that get onto her pages ... all have a hint of the author about them; but this works in the opposite direction too, to make the author into a series of characters, a picaresque figure who lives hand to mouth, by her wits.

(1992:160)

But Nora's digressions (in contrast to those of earlier narrators) are never tempered

by an underlying sense of plan or direction, and her little chats with the reader give rise to ennui rather than mirth. Reviewing the novel, Wendy Brandmark observes that it

could almost have been written by a member of the Fay Weldon writing school, a neophyte author (as indeed her narrator is) dutifully copying her brisk style, her tales of adultery and betrayed sisterhood.

(*Literary Review*, July 1992, 33-4)

Weldon has claimed that in *Life Force* she 'retreated from the authorial voice'.<sup>22</sup> If by this we are meant to understand that Nora, unlike Jocelyn, Praxis, Ruth or Sonia, is to be viewed (and especially heard) on her own, as an entity quite apart from Fay Weldon, then we can only conclude that one of the greatest virtues of Fay Weldon's fiction is - despite her plethora of narrators - her *own* highly distinctive speaking voice. When she tries to efface herself, as in *Life Force* or *Affliction* (where we have no narrative voice at all), the result lacks fluency and incisiveness.

It is the outspoken quality of her novels (her narrators have something shocking to say and the audacity to say it) that has led critics to stress Weldon's feminism. Marianne Wiggins, in a review of *The Heart of the Country*, gives the following witty summary of the generic Fay Weldon novel:

composed of a) an arch, ironic narrative spiked with b) a lot of sex between c) stereotypically gruesome men and d) neurotically heroic women who are the keepers of e) weird and/or precocious children accustomed to f) scenes of domestic violence in g) a topsy-turvy, random world where people suffer all sorts of h) physical grotesqueries. Oh yes, and i) the women pretty nearly always win the war between the sexes and j) the prose is broken on the page by distinctive spaces between episodes, defining brief vignettes as salty and addictive and as easy to consume as individual nibbles in a bag of chips.

(1989:9)

There is a superficial truth in this apparently flippant list. Remarkable, then,

that Weldon's works have managed to be as diverse as, for example, *Down Among the Women* and *The Shrapnel Academy*. My own 'formula' for a Fay Weldon novel would, more seriously, include a) subversive, satirical humour in b) the form of an incorrigible and unpredictable narrator who claims she is the author, who c) is implicitly or explicitly aligned with the cause of the marginalized, especially women, and who d) rectifies the balance by creating a complete imbalance, wreaking havoc, turning tables and generally cutting a swathe through organized society.

Weldon may appear to be using her tried and tested formula - female narrator, who is both protagonist and spectator, comments freely on extraordinary events which she witnesses/engenders - in her recent novels. But two crucial ingredients are missing. In the first place, her earlier narrators launched embittered attacks on specific targets, namely the arbitrary definition of women and their roles, their impoverishment, exploitation and devalorisation. They exposed the misapplication of patriarchal power, its inherent corruption and conscienceless violence. Secondly, by the time Jocelyn, Praxis, Maia, Ruth or Sonia have finished their tales, some form of retribution has been achieved, either by the sheer satirical force of the writing, or because a physical act of revenge has been performed. This dual subversiveness - in both narrative and theme - is the true Weldonian formula. In *Growing Rich*, *Life Force* and *Affliction*, there is anger and rejection, but they are not directed at anything specific. Because of this diffuseness, and because the protagonists lack energy and resilience, the novels fail to produce the memorably cathartic effects of the author's more successful works. Just one example will illustrate this enfeeblement. On discovering his perfidy, Leslie Beck's first wife in *Life Force* resorts not to arson or infanticide, but to 'tearing socks to pieces with her teeth' (35), a risible action more likely to bring harm to herself than to him.

Perhaps because market researchers advised her to try to attract a male readership, Weldon has muffled her feminist voice.<sup>23</sup> This act of suppression has resulted in altogether weaker fictions. Though Weldon has in fact reached a wider audience, this is because her works have been televised (*Growing Rich* was

originally an ITV serial) rather than because there has been an improvement. The fact that the ITV version of *The Cloning of Joanna May* is so much more compelling than the novel itself may indicate that Weldon finds the screen a better medium for her favoured combination of the contemporary, the topical and the bizarre. What this last instance certainly does illustrate is that she has ambitiously embarked on too many projects at once, and that she may consequently have exhausted her own capacity to write well. In the four year period between 1987 and 1990, Weldon published five novels and a novella. Two of these she adapted for television, and one was originally serialized. In addition, during this period Weldon published her polemical *Sacred Cows* (1989) and wrote many of the stories that were to be published in *Moon over Minneapolis* (1991).

There is a definite link between the authorial exhaustion which I presume must have resulted from this workload and Weldon's retreat from feminist polemic. The subversive formula outlined earlier is a feminist one, and its key element is, I have suggested, a protagonist-narrator on the warpath. Where the central character lacks the will and the incentive to fight, the quality of the writing and the impetus of the story also flag. To some extent the sheer tiredness of Darcy, Joanna, Nora and Annette reflects the fatigue of the hidden 'I' of the novel: the author herself. This phenomenon may also explain why, recently, Fay Weldon has denied her heroines the facility that would make them truly heroic: the power to institute meaningful change in their own lives.

One of the most persistent traits of Weldon's angry and destructive narrator is, paradoxically, that few of her qualities endure. Weldon's best narrators are mistresses of disguise and metamorphosis: they are just as likely to don an apron as to dunk a baby in a bath of boiling water,<sup>24</sup> although they may not believe in either action. Their departure from the formula, in particular its element of metamorphosis, helps to explain why *Growing Rich*, *Darcy's Utopia*, *The Cloning of Joanna May*, *Leader of the Band* and *The Rules of Life* are imperfect reflections of *Remember Me*, *Praxis* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. Madeleine, Praxis and Ruth are

women on their own, discarded, sidelined, materially disadvantaged, alienated from their children and assailed by misfortune. All three take advantage of the fluid identity society has ascribed to women (as equivocal beings who are frequently obliged to change their names) and simply re-invent themselves, as an unquiet spirit, she-devil or even Everywoman.<sup>25</sup>

The women in Weldon's recent novels share this mutable quality on the surface only. In *Growing Rich*, for example, Carmen's figure (especially her bust), changes disconcertingly according to the dictates of fashion or occasion. Carmen is mildly irritated with this 'gift' from the devil (Bernard Bellamy's driver who is trying to lure her into his master's bed and wedding ring). Although the problem of Carmen's alternately swelling and diminishing cup size is an amusing parody of magazine articles which intermittently announce whether 'boobs' are 'in' or 'out', Weldon's most cutting satire on the theme of female aesthetics and cosmetic surgery is surely already contained in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. There she crafted a brilliant tale of hatred and revenge out of the beauty myth, inviting apposite parallels with such literary precedents as *Frankenstein* and *The Little Mermaid*. Eleanor Darcy's rise from 'Apricot' to 'Ellen' and then 'Eleanor', on the other hand, pales beside the numerous metamorphoses staged by Praxis. Eleanor lacks Praxis's sense of burden, of having uncovered so many layers of herself that nothing is left but a tired and lonely ex-convict with a sore toe and a social worker. *The Cloning of Joanna May* clearly represents another attempt to look at multiple selves, but again it is facile (possibly with a television audience in mind) in comparison with *Praxis*.

So Weldon's narrators are still 'authors'. The difference, however, lies in their level of inspiration. Jocelyn, Praxis, Ruth and Sonia are distinguished by their drive to subvert the authority that has oppressed them. Subversion implies overthrow, challenge, the weakening or destruction of a dominant ideology. In Weldon's narrators, this translates into a refusal to be crushed which, in turn, produces a genuine and fearless desire to oust or at least to outwit the powers that

be. Imbued with fortitude and even aggression, these women set out to ruin in the spirit of 'devil take the hindmost'. Valerie, Hattie, Nora and Annette (who does not actually narrate, although *Affliction* is almost entirely made up of her utterances) are 'authors' only in the sense that they write or wish to write novels. They are not 'the beginner[s] of any action or state of things', to quote a dictionary definition of the term.

It is fitting, then, given the key role played by the 'author' in her entire oeuvre, to end with some reflections on Fay Weldon's authorship. In a previous chapter I quoted Judith Kegan Gardiner's proposition that

A central question of feminist literary criticism is, Who is there when a woman says, 'I am'? (1982: 178)

A central question in this thesis is, Who is there when Fay Weldon says 'I'? The first person has been for Weldon a marvellous postmodernist guise. The one who says 'I' in her novels could be anyone, including the author herself or one of her characters. But it is seldom the same person from one sentence to the next, because the voice keeps changing its tune. Weldon's 'I' claims to be personal, sincere - even confessional - but only succeeds in compounding the layers of fiction. Thus, since the elusive 'I' in her novels is always female, she contributes to the feminist cause by dismissing or even desecrating (as when she implies that being a prostitute may be a nobler occupation than caring for children or teaching English) the categories that circumscribe women's lives. According to Ebert, in postmodern feminism

disrupting the clarity and certainty of meaning, dehierarchizing binary oppositions, inscribing the *difference within*, celebrating undecidability, and speaking woman's unrepresentable excess (her *jouissance*) through such textual strategies as deconstruction, mimicry, parody, pastiche, free association, and so on, are all subversive acts: they denaturalize and expose the illusion of identity and certainty on which the regime of patriarchal representation rests ...

(1991: 896)

Weldon has not only perfected the art of subversive fiction: she has subverted the very fact (or act) of authorship. Proclaiming the existence, let alone the importance, of the author is anathema to poststructuralist theorists such as Barthes or Foucault who announced 'his' death.<sup>26</sup> However, an exception must be argued here. As her favourite quotation - 'that was not what I meant at all' - suggests, Weldon is an author-in-process, always in the act of departing from her most recently stated position, and therefore never simply 'the author'. Her flippant riposte to the interviewer who confronted her with one of her own remarks - 'Did I really say that? How interesting. I must have believed it' - is in fact a statement of her philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Despite postmodernist prevarications, it *is* important to look at Fay Weldon as author, even if (or perhaps because) we never find her as one single identity. As Nancy Miller has asserted,

[t]he postmodernist decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc.

(Walker, 1990: 556)

Among the Fay Weldons we discover is an impoverished single, working mother with an almost exclusively female family background who translates these biographical experiences into indignant feminist fictions such as *Down Among the Women* (1971), *Female Friends* (1975) and *Praxis* (1979). But just when we thought we could categorize her as 'feminist', we apprehend that there is another Fay Weldon, who thinks (in fictions and in interviews) that cosmetic surgery may be fine and who makes an elaborate connection between gynaecology and gender in her novel *Puffball* (1980). And there is the Fay Weldon who enjoys literary respect (winning awards, sitting on panels, invited to write television adaptations of fictional classics) and who discourses elegantly on Literature in *Letters to Alice on First*

*Reading Jane Austen* (1984) and *Rebecca West* (1985). But there is also Fay Weldon the opportunist, whose eye is forever on the latest topic of public interest and who turns television series - such as *The Heart of the Country* (1988) - into novels, and publishes a novel - *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987) - first as a magazine serial. The politically correct Fay Weldon takes up the issue of ecology; the politically eccentric Fay Weldon uses the Rushdie affair to denounce Islam in *Sacred Cows* (1989). The now financially comfortable Fay Weldon, who publishes a new novel almost annually, is offset by Weldon Champion of Writers, who lambastes producers at the Edinburgh Television Festival and chastises publishers at the Booker Prize ceremony.<sup>28</sup>

These manifold contradictions offer not one but many keys to understanding and appreciating Fay Weldon. Her contrariness tempts one to conclude by quoting her own evaluation of another inimitable woman writer:

Argue with her? Remonstrate? You must be joking! Here is a woman who has seen a lot, thought a lot, and come to many unwelcome conclusions, all of them right.

(*Rebecca West*: 12)

Nevertheless, two crucial observations may be drawn from the anomalies listed above. In the first place, it would be extremely inconsistent for a thesis which has admired the author's lively and subversive feminism to turn around and declare that what we have here is the case of a woman writer who should have produced fewer, higher quality texts, aesthetically sound though this may be. Secondly, any writer who has appeared in as many guises as Fay Weldon must surely always be given another chance to prove herself.<sup>29</sup> she has, after all, a tendency to surpass herself. Indeed, the problem that this thesis has (implicitly) had to grapple with constantly, is that the author is not dead, but very much alive.

## Endnotes

1. At the time of writing (March 1995) *Affliction* and *Splitting* (1993 and 1995 respectively) are Fay Weldon's most recent novels. To make the thesis manageable, as mentioned in my introduction, a cut-off date of 1992 was originally adopted. In fact, with the appearance in quick succession of several novels of dubious value (*Growing Rich* and *Life Force*, for example, were both published in 1992) it became clear that this concluding chapter would have to do something other than provide a detailed, if critical, reading of Weldon's most recent fiction. In addition to the novels cited, Fay Weldon has recently published two children's books, *Party Puddle* and *Wolf, the Mechanical Dog* in 1988, the polemical essay *Sacred Cows* in 1989, and a collection of short stories, *Moon over Minneapolis*, in 1991.
2. In Hensher's review of *The Reader's Companion to the Twentieth Century Novel* (*The Spectator*, 17-24 December 1994). By drawing attention to Weldon's choice of titles I am not merely being flippant. Although there may be little truth to Snoopy's dismayed exclamation (having crumpled up typescripts with such headings as *Far from the Maddening Crowd*) that 'All the best ones have been taken', an attractive title is surely a significant consideration for an author. And unlike earlier centuries, when a mere name - *Emma* - or simply stated geographical setting - *Wuthering Heights* - was elegantly sufficient, there *is* something like a competition for catchiest title in contemporary publishing. This may well reflect the effect of popular media, advertising and a consumer culture generally, on current reading practices.
3. 'Perhaps in some way my own personality plays into the text?' (36) asks the nervous priest who listens to recorded voices from the dead. It was Werner Heisenberg, German physicist and Nobel Laureate, whose Uncertainty principle called into question the simple laws of cause and effect. This principle has had far-reaching implications for all academic disciplines where observation is a factor, because the subjectivity of the experimenter is seen to alter the outcome of any act of observation. The priest's quandary in *The Rules of Life* parodies the poststructuralist critic's awareness of Uncertainty.
4. Gabriella's account could come straight from Raymond Moody's popular book *Life after Life* (1975):

She was in a long, long corridor; reddish, warm ... and along this corridor she

travelled, swiftly and composedly, and with great joy, knowing it was back the way she had come. And, as she passed, person after person stepped from the doors which lined the corridor - friends, some she knew and recognised, others she had forgotten but now remembered .... when she reached the end of the endless corridor and stepped out into a great white brilliant space she was, as it were, the summation of everything she had ever known... .

(13)

5. *Woman's Journal* (January 1990) carried the following insert publicising the television screening of *The Cloning of Joanna May*:

Weldon has an open mind about genetic engineering. 'It certainly impresses me. I'm sure it is the future .... I see real life like that - fact and fantasy are closely interlinked .... What I do is focus on things vaguely perceived. For most people, genetic engineering is "somewhere over there", it doesn't impinge. But when you apply it to captains of industry like Carl May, it's not beyond reality.'

(8)

6. In a somewhat unlikely scenario, the wealthy Cas wants his wife 'to give a party and ask the de Klerks' (48).

7. Saunders' review begins:

Once upon a time, a gaggle of middle-aged, middle-class writers, each with a few odd scraps of left-wing idealism still adhering to their well-fed consciences, went round to Harold Pinter's house and began to fret about the evils of society. Why was the British public so indifferent to intellectuals? Why did it keep voting Tory? Why were policemen so beastly - and so young? There were universal tut-tuts of agreement. The outmoded pine furniture cluttering these great minds was dragged back into the open and given a fresh coat of varnish. The June 20th Group was born.

(Literary Review, Sept 1990: 15-16)

8. *Weekend*, 22-28 October 1992.

9. The play was mounted as a co-production between the BBC and Los Angeles Theatre Works and directed in Hollywood by Shane MacLoughlin. It was broadcast in Britain on Radio 3 in 1993. *Plays and Players* reviewed it in April 1993:61.

10. In *Affliction* Annette's husband leaves her because she is 'badly afflicted in both the Fourth and Seventh house. The house of childhood and the house of marriage' (37).

11. The story 'A Libation of Blood' echoes *Praxis* in its contentious treatment of Down's Syndrome babies.
12. An interesting comparison is offered by *Lady Oracle* (1976) in which Margaret Atwood's first-person narrator, Joan Foster, tells the story of her life from a position in the present. She has staged her own suicide and escaped to Italy, bringing with her her other identity, that of Louisa Delacourt, writer of Gothic Romances. Chunks of her current romance, tentatively entitled *Stalked by Love*, are interspersed throughout the narrative.
13. Hattie loses the feeling in her legs under extraordinary circumstances:  

I was twenty-three when complications following a bodged pregnancy termination required emergency invasive surgery, and a wasp bit the knife-wielding hand mid-stroke, and a section of my neural fibre was inadvertently severed. (205)

Nevertheless, after a bad fall from her wheelchair, Hattie inexplicably recovers, thus providing a convenient denouement for the novel:  

Perhaps the paralysis was indeed hysterical; perhaps the Chicago neural graft had finally done its work; perhaps some disc in my backbone, which had been causing the trouble, was released: perhaps the benefit which flowed from Carmen's assent to her own female nature flowed into me as well - though what feminist would want to hear that? (237)
14. See for example, *A Feminist Critique of Language* (1990), edited by Deborah Cameron. London:Routledge.
15. 'A Sting in the Tail of the She-devil' was published in South Africa in the Weekend Argus *Sunday* magazine, February 12, 1995: 2. I assume that it first appeared in Britain in 1994, closer to the date of the novel's publication, and may thus be construed to be part of the novel's publicity.
16. A notable coincidence, as mentioned in Chapter Three (p115), is her strangely prophetic American presidential candidate, Dandy Ivel, in *The President's Child* (1982). Aspects of Ivel's appearance and media presentation make him uncannily like Bill Clinton, elected in 1992.
17. My source of reference is Microsoft *Encarta*, Funk and Wagnall, 1994.
18. Lectures as well as a debate are mentioned in Bron Sibree's interview with Weldon. 'A Sting in the Tail of the She-devil', Weekend Argus *Sunday* magazine, February 12, 1995: 2.
19. Ironically, this novel apparently reflects Fay Weldon's real experiences with husband Ron Weldon's band. (Ron Weldon died in 1994, so she may not be accused of libel on account of *Affliction*.)

20. Weldon has previously satirized the fine art market. *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1987) contains a memorable inventory of a distressed painter's oeuvre, including '(1) *Beached Whale With Vultures* - damaged' and '(5) *Kitten with Hand* - stained (coffee?)' (53). See p165 of this thesis.
21. Tom Shone, *The Spectator* (1992: 29).
22. Interview with Shirley Kossick, January 1993.
23. In his review of *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, Stan Gebler Davies refers to the advance of £450,000 paid to Weldon by Collins for her next three novels. He also claims that the publishers 'have deployed market research and come to the conclusion that she is insufficiently targeted at male buyers' (1987: 7070).

Weldon is certainly not above financial considerations. In 'Harnessed to the Harpy: notes for Aspiring Writers' published in *The Agony and The Ego: The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*, Weldon develops a theory about multiple personalities engaged in the act of literary production. A and B work together under the guise of a single artistic persona:

A is the one who produces first drafts: A is creative, impetuous, wilful, emotional, sloppy: she works by hand. B does the editing - works from the printout, achieves the subsequent drafts and is argumentative, self-righteous, cautious, rational, effective, perfectionist, ambitious .... B never thinks about money: A often does. You'd think it would be the other way round, but no. B's the one with the integrity.

(185-6)

24. I am thinking here of Jocelyn in *Down Among the Women*.
25. Weldon has acknowledged female name- and identity-changing (most notably through the convention of the woman changing her surname on marriage) as a recurrent feature in her novels and has said that she is drawn to this 'problem of being a woman' (Kossick, 1993).
26. See, for example, Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984); Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text* (New York, 1977).
27. *Contemporary Authors* interview, 1984:425. Weldon prefers fiction, where 'fortunately ... there are this week's truths and next week's' (Haffenden, 1985:314).
28. In 1984, in her capacity as chairperson of the Booker Prize Committee, Weldon claimed 'the publishing machine abused, patronised, underpaid and looted the author's talent' (Bragg, 1984: 23). In the same year she declared 'war on directors' at the

Edinburgh Television Festival (22).

29. It would seem from the reviews that *Splitting* (just published) may be on the way to restoring Fay Weldon's literary reputation. Lucy Hughes-Hallett's review offers an extended appreciation of Weldon's comic gift:

Weldon is a comedian, a singularly fluent one, with a flamboyant personal style. ... [Her] talent is a gift of the gab. Her voices are various, but they are all animated by the prodigious trickery of her language. She pours out jokes, puns, paragraphs of sardonic homespun wisdom.

(1995:7)

Cosima von Bülow, after comparing the (slightly simplified) American edition of *Splitting* with the original British manuscript, declares that 'what is already very good becomes (in my 50 per cent American opinion) 100 per cent better' (1995: 46).

But the most glowing praise comes from Kate Kellaway. Her review vindicates my thesis that Weldon is an author perpetually in process, and testifies to the resurgence of Weldon's career:

*Splitting* is a shout of triumph about a woman who does more than survive, and its anger is tempered by mirth. Weldon has reinvented herself as a modern Restoration comic: her story has a 17th-century savagery, wit and calculating sexuality.

... She writes without qualm or caution, with freedom and a go-to-hell defiance. She writes like a veteran yet with freshness and ease. This is a book in which laughter is a form of revenge and a cure for pain.

... The splitting device works shamelessly well. Weldon uses it as a way of exploring and rejoicing in the theatricality of women, their volatility, their love of disguise, of fancy dress, of playing different parts.

... It would strain belief to read this brazen, queenly cartoon as a version of real life; the whole point of it is that it is overblown, fierce, rampant and entertainingly elasticated. But the idea behind the story, though breezily offered, is in earnest: 'One door shuts: another opens. The harder the slam, the greater the gust of air and the more dramatic the new opening.'

(*The Observer Review*, 7 May 1995)

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(Where my edition is a later one, its date of publication is given after the name of the publisher.)

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