

LADY ORACLE AND MASS LITERATURE:
FEMALE STEREOTYPES

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I can change my-
self more easily
than I can change you

I could grow bark and
become a shrub

or switch back in time
to the woman image left
in cave rubble, the drowned
stomach bulbed with fertility,
face a tiny bead, a
lump, queen of the termites

or (better) speed myself up, disguise myself in the knuckles
and purple-veined veils of old ladies,...

(Margaret Atwood (1995), "She considers evading him")

*Lady Oracle*¹ (1976) is a metafictional² novel, narrated from the perspective of a woman writer who interweaves the story of her life

with excerpts from the books she writes, pieces of criticism on them and commentaries on the act of writing.

The novel is built on intermingled and juxtaposed narrative levels. The main narrative course that tells the story of the writer Joan Foster is broken, now and then, to give room to the stories she writes, such as *Stalked by Love*, which is totally reproduced, and *The Lord of Chesney Chase, Love, My Ransom, Escape for Love*, and *Lady Oracle* (a book of poems), which we know of through references or fragments. The main narrative, from now on identified as Narrative A, focuses on the metamorphosis Foster goes through both as a woman and as a writer (Conflict 1), whilst *Stalked by Love*, the narrative that counterpoints the latter in what concerns the characterization of the female protagonists (Conflict 2), can be identified as Narrative B. No matter of how easily these narratives can be isolated, they cannot be considered independent unities. The interferences among the narrative levels, as well as the conflicts that happen in Joan's inner self and in her heroines, and the relationship established between them are the material upon which the plot of the novel is structured. Everything interweaves. Whereas Foster's protagonists oppose Foster herself, they mimize much of her anxieties and desires.

Joan Foster/ Louise K. Delacourt (Joan's pseudonym) writes *Costume Gothics*.³ They are pocket books that deal with stereotyped⁴ female protagonists involved in supernatural, banal and predictable plots. These novels present helpless and unprotected maids who go through uncanny stories and are placed in somber and sinister castles. Due to the metafictional nature of the text, as Foster writes her "junky novels" (154), she discusses overtly the process of writing, her purpose in having chosen such kind of literature (besides the one of making easy money), and the effects they may produce on her readers. Her heroines, for instance, have blurred features, aiming at encouraging a somewhat keen identification with them on the part of her reading public—mostly women:

The heroines of my books were mere stand'ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty. (34-35)

Such identification between character and reader can be seen as one of the elements that keeps literature (and any artistic expression) alive, and it can perhaps be better understood if we examine the stereotypes (a determinant factor in this process of identification) as near synonyms to archetypes⁵ and myths. The female stereotypes find their original meanings in the archetypal roles assigned to women labeled by a male sexual politics and a patriarchal value system. The main archetypal women delineated by Greek and Judaic-Hebraic myths and legends were the earth mother, the wife, the mistress, the virgin, and the wise woman. Each of them depicted positive or negative intrinsic characteristics, defined and evaluated by men, and as such they have become matrix-like images which exist in the collective unconscious. One of the passages in the book that best illustrates the male conception of the women's division into stereotyped categories is that in which Foster tells the Polish Count's (her first lover) view of her:

If you ask a woman to move into your apartment and she consents, naturally she is consenting to be your mistress. It's an odd term, "mistress," but that was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged: wives and mistresses. I was not the first mistress. For him there was no such thing as a female lover. (150)

Likewise, the most outstanding function of the myth is "to fix the exemplar models of all the rites and meaningful human activities, such as feeding, sexuality, work, education, etc." (Eliade 108) Archetypes, myths and stereotypes, although of distinctive original conceptions, present very similar aspects that allow us to approach the literary text

from such a perspective, and establish the link between fiction and reality.

Myth organizes the world as the novel organizes the fictional universe for the reader. It is built upon two basic elements: the repetition of the same rituals and its collective character. Fiction, likewise, when it fits into the frame of the so-called "mass literature",⁶ shows these very same elements, that is, redundancy of patterns or stereotypes that guarantee its collective nature. These matrices (archetypal, mythical or stereotypical ones) express themselves in similar patterns in all cultures through symbols, religion, and art.⁷ In literature these matrices are applied to "an image, a descriptive detail, a plot pattern or a frequent character type that is believed to evoke profound emotions in the reader because it awakens a primordial image in the unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses" (Holman 34). It is their function to fulfill vital needs, because as sources of pleasure, they allow relaxation, catharsis, comfort, and moreover escape from reality.

Because they deal with myths, archetypes and stereotypes, thus favoring escapism, Gothic novels were and still are debased as a literary genre. Foster questions their aesthetic validity and their influence on her readers' mind. The novels, says the narrator, are about escapist literature. She is aware of the ideological implications of escapism in the books she writes. She understands the complexity of her readers' social-psychological needs (factors that determine their reading choices) and does not deny the pleasure that can be attained by reading popular fictions. The collective unconscious, myth and stereotypes together may bring as a consequence the loss of private human existence. However, sinking into the collective psyche is the only means of allowing the possibility of a satisfying and bearable life. In his essential work about mass media in the twentieth century, Edgar Morin explores all the meanders of the relationship between myths and the aesthetic field of mass culture:

It is because mass culture becomes the great provider of the conductive myths of relax, of happiness, of love, that we can understand the movement which impels it, not only from the real into the imaginary, but also from the imaginary into the real. It is not only escapism, it is at the same time, and contradictorily, integration. (90, v.1)

His central concern lies on the degree of influence aesthetics performs on practical life, whether by invalidating it or informing it, a theme that is also basic in *Lady Oracle*. In her defense of mass literature, Foster says that the better world, offered by her Gothic novels, is of the uttermost importance to the women who were bombarded since infancy with promises of true love and happiness and that, finally, understood that reality is quite different:

He (Arthur, her husband) wouldn't have been able to understand in the least the desire, the pure quintessential need of my readers for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well. Life had been hard on them and they had not fought back, they'd collapsed like soufflés in a high wind. Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other pain killers. (34)

Yet, Foster experiences ambiguous feelings about her literary activity. To Paul (the Polish Count with whom she has learned to write Costume Gothics), for instance, she does not pretend: "He began to attack my novels too, calling them cheap and frivolous, and it infuriated him when I agreed with him pleasantly. Of course they were cheap and frivolous, I said, but I had never claimed I was a serious writer" (160). It works differently with Arthur, though. If, on the one hand, she is proud to

afford such means of escape to her readers, on the other, she never dares to tell her husband about her profession (although it is her writing that supports them), for she is aware of Arthur's approach to such kind of literature:

These books, with their covers featuring gloomy, foreboding castles and apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns, hair streaming in the wind, eyes bulging like those of a goiter victim, toes poised for flight, would be considered trash of the lowest order. Worse than trash, for didn't they exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted? (34)

She defends herself by arguing that such escapist reading is conscious and that her readers are utterly able to distinguish between the real world (the world where they live) and this other one, the totally fake and idealized universe (fictional) of her fantastic stories. She claims that her readers are aware of the stereotyped protagonists and of the repetitive formula of her narratives, as well as of their inevitable happy end. Further, she states that she actually deals with hope itself, by displaying the view of a better world, however absurd. As she complains:

So you're [(Arthur)] interested in the people, the workers, I would say to him during my solitary midnight justifications. Well, that's what the people and the workers read, the female ones anyway, when they have time to read at all and they can't face the social realism of *True Confessions*. They read my books. Figure that out. ...I knew my readers well, I went to school with them...now I could play fairy godmother to them, despite their obvious defects, their calves which were too skinny, those disfiguring hairs on their upper lips...I had the power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold. (35)

Stalked by Love (Narrative B), her fictional novel, follows the best tradition of the female Gothic. The story takes place in Lord Redmond Grange's old castle and premises. He has hired Charlotte's services to repair Felicia's (his third wife) jewels. Charlotte, the heroine, is an honest young lady, of good character, a virgin (mainly), who awaits for true love to enter her life. A modest girl, of "delicate pale features," Charlotte has promised her dying mother "to always tell the truth, to be pure, circumspect and obedient" (127). The villainous Felicia is her counterpoint: an intrepid woman, sensual, seductive, predator of men, symbol of sin. She is unfaithful, false and dangerous. White skinned, green-eyed and with fiery hair, Felicia strolls arm in arm with the Earl of Otterly (Redmond's half brother), exchanging confidences, laughing contemptuously whereas she assures him that "Redmond suspects nothing" (128). Lord Redmond perfects the love triangles: Felicia (and Otterly) *versus* Redmond, and Felicia *versus* Charlotte (and Redmond). Of scandalous reputation, he tries to kiss Charlotte, who shrinks back, but wrapped up in a whirl of confused emotions, falls in love with him. He is to suffer a lot in the hands of the daring Felicia in order to find true happiness in Charlotte's pure and sincere love. The unfaithful wife's death and Charlotte and Redmond's marriage at the end are obviously inevitable. Consequently, the reader's identification with Charlotte happens naturally, due to her being a conspicuous woman, of good ideals, sexually repressed and pure hearted.

The issue of how women face and deal with these opposing versions of femininity found in popular literature is problematic and has been focused in many critical essays. Elizabeth Long's research "Women, reading, and cultural authority: some implications of the audience perspective in cultural studies", based on premises such as the following statement "You know, when I read something, I'm looking for me and my experience," takes for granted that

The final and most dramatic meaning of what I have called reading groups' allegiance to realism, however, lies in the

real, not of plot or style, but of character. Members often respond directly to fictional characters as *if* they were real people, discussing whether they like or dislike, admire or despise them, rather than focusing on how or why authors may have constructed such characters...Indeed, women often expand on an opinion by discussing their personal reasons for making a certain interpretation, thus using the book for self-understanding and revelation of the self...(606,603)

Therefore, a parallel between Joan Foster's concern with her audience, on the fictional level, and the conclusion achieved in studies such as the one mentioned above, which involves a 'real life perspective', leads us to verify how close the two views are. Thus, Foster seems to be dealing with truthful and reliable data that can demonstrate the close relation between fiction and life, and how literature can influence the reader's process of self-acknowledgment. Likewise, R. M. Elson convincingly states:

While popular literature probably influenced its readers, it was not the single or even the most important source of popular values, but it did reflect and reinforce them. ...But constantly repeated stereotypes in popular literature could fix a picture firmly in the reader's mind. And if the reader had no personal experience in a particular area, books were likely to have major effects. (Ch.I)⁸

Further, and of uttermost importance, Joan Foster's focus lies on the female audience, so much so that, besides trying to show how women readers identify with her characters, she goes farther by implying that they not only learn about themselves, but that they are also the ones in charge of transmitting such knowledge to society. As it happens in Gothic romances, the metafictional game in this novel leads to the discussion of the formation of female individuality, which is a

problematic concept for the woman. It engenders a debate that passes down from one generation to another. Foster knows this very well, which responds for her pride of being widely read: "But at least a hundred thousand people read my books, and among them were **the mothers of the nation.**" (247) [Emphasis added]

Whenever we refer to individuality we ought to bring up the issues of subject/object within the relations of power. One of the elements that determines them is sexuality, its repression and/or release: "To say that sex is not repressed, or rather that the relationship between sex and power is not characterized by repression, is to risk falling into a sterile paradox," as Foucault teaches us (1978, 8). The female stereotypes in *Lady Oracle* are considered as such according to the bourgeois mores of Western society which are modeled by male logic, based on the sexual "triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence" imposed by "modern puritanism" (Foucault 1978, 5). From this standpoint Charlotte and Felicia, in *Stalked by Love* (Narrative B), are doomed never to ascend to the condition of subjects, due to their sexual behavior. The first, because of sexual repression, is condemned to stand for the Virgin image. The second, by trying to exercise her sexuality without censure and guilt, stands for the prostitute and is, therefore, unsuitable to comply with the demands of the role of a wife. Further, both of them will never be allowed the possibility of changing their future positions, for as non-subjects, they will always be governed by the ones who hold the power to "structure the possible field of [their] action" (Foucault 1982, 790).

In *Lady Oracle* the character who is free to resist subjection is Joan Foster, the antithesis of her own characters. Atwood grants her the means to struggle against such forms of domination, by letting her follow a life full of diversified experiences (sexual and others) and by bestowing her with a sharp and creative mind. The writer Joan Foster manages strategies of confrontation and knows how to find the right points of insubordination that will conduct the narrative toward the dissociation of relations of power.

In *Stalked by Love*, the villain's sexuality and the heroine's repression are at service to the maintenance of the male ideology of domination. Such cultural chains interdict the female sexuality, thus constraining the possibilities of women's development, placing them in an uneven position men. The heroine of popular fiction represents, actually, the magnified expression of such an ideology that guarantees women's subordination. "Writing and ideology cannot be separated, no matter how formalist or self-conscious the writing. For Atwood, issues of power pervade both the product and the process of creation," states Linda Hutcheon (1988, 139).

Atwood gives us a clear dimension of the problem at stake, because she uses parody as the main source for criticizing popular novels as a literary genre and the female stereotypes in them:

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood further and more explicitly explores the artist as both the instigator of the creative process and, indeed, as a product of her own art. Here parody and self-parody meet in a feminist exploration of the art/life paradoxes in the context of the notion of female subjectivity. (Hutcheon 1988, 145)

Thus, it is the vein of satire and irony which inflame parody,⁹ combined with the *mise en abyme* structure of a metafictional text (self-reflexive *par excellence*) as *Lady Oracle* certainly is, that places Atwood's novel on the track of the female Gothic led by Jane Austen's classical novel *Northanger Abbey* (1798).¹⁰

In *Northanger Abbey*, an omniscient narrator presents the female characters engaged in debates on the literary merits of special kinds of narrative and strongly attacks the reading of Gothic novels. Catherine Morland, the heroine, mixes up fiction and reality to the point of imagining that her host keeps his wife prisoner for years in one of the various dungeons of his medieval castle, thus exactly reproducing the villain's terrible actions of the fictions she is used to reading. Austen

does not spare arguments to show that her heroine's fanciful and shallow thoughts about marriage and love have been affected by the degrading influence of reading sentimental novels with their tales of horror, mystery, and sinister adventures, exemplified by genuine Gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and her "imitators" (202), and other novels, namely, *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda* (62).¹¹ Nevertheless, Austen justifies her heroine's reading of these novels, which connecting her own work with those parodied in it. She proposes that novelists should support one another, in order to defend themselves against the critics: "Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?" (58). If, on the one hand, Austen ironically creates a heroine who is unable to read novels critically, on the other hand she reveals her heroic dimension, by making her realize, almost at the end of the novel, that "visions of romance were over" (201), for they are inappropriate to life. The possibility of parodying a literary genre and at the same time offering her own novel to be itself the object of future parodies is achieved "through its essential self-reflexivity," because "parody rather constantly demonstrates its awareness of contributing to the tradition that it mocks."¹²

Similarly to Austen, Atwood in *Lady Oracle* emphasizes her critical perspective to the Gothic novel from within, by raising a discussion on the genre itself, by writing a novel that belongs to it, and also by creating a skillful protagonist who resists embodying the paradigms of female stereotypes. As it is so clearly explained by Michele Hannoosh, the self-reflexivity of parody is always relative, though ideologically strong:

The self-reflexivity of parody thus guarantees both a critical and a creative dimension to this form. The parody not only rewrites another work, but suggests yet another one within itself, reminding the reader of the relativism of any work of art, and also of the richness of creative possibilities in an allegedly limited single source. (117)

Therefore, when we counterpoint Conflicts 1 and 2, we verify that Foster is a deeply complex and verisimilar character who participates in an intelligent, clairvoyant, funny, touching narrative which is also alternately satirical and lyrical. The diverse situations in which she is involved and the frequent transformations she goes through, when in opposition to the characters of her Costume Gothics, validate the label applied to them: stereotypes of femininity.

Foster narrates her daily life since her childhood when, due to an absent father and an indifferent mother—"my mother was a monster" (67)—, she had already incorporated her mother's simplistic idea about the two basic categories of men: "...nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you." (69) Adolescence is also satirized in the episode of the dance (an intertext with "The Red Shoes" by Andersen):¹³ although arrested by her role as a butterfly, the obese and grotesque Joan is reduced to a ridiculous mothball. Hurt in her feelings, she recalls: "I threw myself into the part, it was a dance of rage and destruction..." (50)

Foster dreams of a radical transformation in her life. But if "the magic transformation" (46) she had been waiting for so long does not happen during the dance, it finally comes after her aunt's death. Her first major metamorphosis occurs when she is required by her Aunt Lou's will to lose a hundred pounds as a condition to inherit a worthy sum of money. Her whole life changes. Before such transformation, her relationship with the outside world was somewhat amorphous and marginalized as the result of a latent sexuality. Her fatness kept her insulated, "a cocoon" (141):

I'd never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety. I wasn't whistled or pinched on elevators...(140)

Joan's fatness and weight reduction are part of this same problematic of the woman in search of an identity within Western culture. The social code inflicts the invisibility of the "Fat Lady," but paradoxically she is spectacular and imposes herself to society, in the sense that she is resistant to adopt and adapt her body (and mind) to this same code. Joan does not resist though. Weight reduction suddenly changes her into an interesting and desirable woman. She then starts her double life: "I was now a different person, and it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen: I was the right shape, but I had the wrong past..." (141)

It is then that the once fat and ugly Joan Foster moves to London and becomes the beautiful and alluring Louise K. Delacourt (her aunt's name), the pen name of her Costume Gothics. She learns about sex as well as her profession with the Polish Count who works in a bank and makes extra money by writing popular novels (under the pseudonym of Mavis Quilp) about nurses— "trashy books..., each ending with nurse and doctor wrapped in each other's arms as firmly and antiseptically as elastic bandages" (160,153). For the one who "wanted to have more than one life" (141), it seems she has chosen the right career: "Escape literature, he (Count Paul) told me, should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader" (155).

The second transformation Foster goes through happens when later on, due to a failing marriage and total disappointment with the possibilities she envisions for her own future, she simulates suicide by drowning in Lake Michigan,¹⁴ has her long red hair cut short and goes to Terremoto, in Italy, in order to start anew far away from her home country (Canada), from Arthur, the husband she has left, and from her successful public life. When married to Arthur, a dull Canadian activist, she writes a book of poems—*Lady Oracle*—in automatic writing, inspired by her aunt and becomes a cult figure, worshipped by the media, now using her real name.

Lady Oracle (Narrative C), the book Foster writes, is "about the male-female roles in our society" (227). *Lady Oracle*, the eponymous heroine, is "enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an

unhappy power." The woman puzzles Foster, for "she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building" (222). At the same time, this woman is a menace to men, for in spite of kneeling and bending down under the power, "...her tears are the death you [men] fear" (222). Threatened by Lady Oracle/Foster's power—the wife, the woman and the writer—"one and three" (226), Arthur simply ignores her book and success. The book "seemed a lot like one of my [her] standard Costume Gothics, but a Gothic gone wrong" (232). Embedded in Narrative A, *Lady Oracle* establishes the contradiction to the basic Gothic patterns transparent in *Stalked by Love*. Along with the figure of Joan Foster—the woman and the artist—*Lady Oracle* strengthens the metafictional paradox centered on the constitution of the feminine literary model and its resonance on the female reader. Besides, Atwood makes use of this book as a means of parodying hermetic modern poetry based on automatic writing. The meeting with her new lover during the party her editors offer her corroborates this. The Royal Porcupine, the "Master of the CON-CREATE POEM" (239), disparages Foster's poetry by saying it is obsolete and very easy to be written. His, on the contrary, is "the poetry of *things*," something that "has never been done before" (241). On the other hand, however, the more obscure the meaning of *Lady Oracle*, the more dangerous and threatening it becomes. Further, the more powerful Foster becomes.

Atwood breaks through the notion of unity concerning the composition of characters when she counterpoints to the degrading female stereotypes of consumerist literature, this character who is varied, complex, multiple, contradictory and multifaceted. Joan Foster/Louise K. Delacourt do not exhaust the possibilities Joan attributes to her own self. Besides them, the puzzle she builds with identities seems never to stop. It starts when she is born and named after Joan Crawford [or "Joan of Arc, accused of witchcraft?" (336)], whose real name was Lucy the Sweet. It would fit better the once fat Joan Delacourt, in her dancing costume as a moth. Then the puzzle goes on through the slim Joan Foster and Louise K. Delacourt the writer, each wrapped in dreams and

daydreams of in/visibility and dis/appearance of diversified alter egos that fuse fiction, reality, spiritualism and fantasy. Joan's self multiplies in the specter of her mother and the Fat Lady's apparitions, "that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin.... But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many" (246). As she puts it, her self increases infinitely, in her "funhouse-mirror reflection" (251), a metaphor that illustrates Atwood's "awareness of instability,"¹⁵ a fact that places her ahead of feminist achievements. The effect of these multiple images juxtaposes the mirror and the labyrinth (a maze which Charlotte is advised against, because Lord Redmond's two first wives have disappeared there, and it seems to be Felicia's destiny) of *Stalked by Love*. Mirror and labyrinth, once again, point out the amalgam between Narratives A and B. First because before arriving in Terremoto, Foster imagines that Arthur wants to kill her, and when there, she feels threatened by an unknown man (the journalist?) as it generally happens to Gothic heroines who confuse the hero with the killer. In the second place (a consequence of the first reason), because her own self fuses with Felicia's, as it is keenly noticed by Sigrid Renaux:

Although the identity of this new "pursuer" is still unknown, his presence is enough for her to feel menaced, as menaced as the heroine of the Costume Gothic novel she was writing, Felicia, lost in the maze that belonged to her husband's castle. It is here that the climactic scene of her multiple identities takes place, as she is writing another scene of the novel, with closed eyes, and we realize that the four women Felicia meets are actually images of Joan's former selves. (41)

Atwood "deconstructs the homogeneous self," just to echo Eleonora Rao's accurate observation.¹⁶ The *mise en abyme* device allows us to understand Joan and Felicia as facets of the same being. The movement

between Joan's life and her characters is dialectic. Felicia's death in the end of *Stalked by Love* corresponds to Joan's fake suicide in the opening scene of *Lady Oracle* which foretells the be/coming of this new woman. Their "deaths" represent the beginning of Joan's new life, a metaphor that points out a rebirth, the result of all her past experience which is also mimetized in *Lady Oracle*, the protagonist of her poem, who catalyzes all of her former selves and stands for Foster's powerful writing, an *écriture* of resistance, that proposes changes:

...She sits on the iron throne
 She is one and three
 the dark lady the redgold lady
 the blank lady oracle
 of blood, she who must be
 obeyed forever
 Her glass wings are gone
 She floats down the river
 singing the last song. (226)

As "The Little Mermaid/ the big mermaid", the mysterious Lady Oracle/Foster sinks and emerges like "a female monster, larger than life" (336), a witch who has come out from the "frame of a baroque mirror" (7) with the aim of facing reality free from the veils of fake identities.

More than once, Foster is tempted to abandon the conventions of the Gothic novel. She tends to release Felicia from her doom, in an attempt to break through a patriarchally constructed order. Her criticism of the genre achieves the climax when Joan Foster, now mature and experienced, gets tired of Charlotte and feels like showing sympathy for Felicia:

I was getting tired of Charlotte, with her intact virtue and her tidy ways. Wearing her was like wearing a hair shirt, she

made me itchy, I wanted her to fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart. Even her terrors were too pure...(319-320)... I knew what had to happen. Felicia, of course, would have to die; such was the fate of wives. Charlotte would then be free to become a wife in her turn. These were the desired goals, but I was having trouble reaching them. (316)

Undoubtedly, Foster pursues Felicia's humanization, for she does not resign herself to being culturally biased on behalf of the deification of Charlotte's artificiality.

For one thing, Felicia was still alive, and I couldn't seem to get rid of her. She was losing more and more of her radiant beauty; circles were appearing beneath her eyes, lines between her brows, she had a pimple on her neck, and her complexion was becoming sallow. Charlotte, on the other hand, had roses in her cheeks and a spring in her step...also, her sixth sense told her she would be awarded the prize, the prizes in fact, for in addition to Redmond she would get the emeralds, the family silvers, deeds of land stowed away in attics...she would sack the evil servants...and reward the virtuous ones and generally throw her weight around... (316-317)

The inversion would in fact be a subversion of the iconography of the genre. However, Foster knows that sympathy for Felicia is out of question: it is against the Gothic code, it would spoil the whole plot, it would not sell. In her *Costume Gothics* there is no room for a female counterdiscourse and countervaluation. The relations of power between the heroine and the villain, and between these two stereotypes and the male centered culture of society cannot prevail in pop art. So that she ends by molding her characters according to the popular taste, thus

fulfilling instead of challenging her readers' expectations. Moreover, Foster longs for happy endings. It is part of her nature. She is a romantic in spite of herself: "I needed the feeling of release when everything turned out right and I could scatter joy like rice all over my characters and dismiss them into bliss"(320). Thus, she ends her novel by following the Gothic ideology and rules through the preservation of polarities: Good *versus* Evil, angel *versus* demon or monster and virgin *versus* sensual seductress. The sensual villain in it is properly punished and the pure, innocent and correct heroine takes the place of the wife. Everything is perpetuated. If each stereotype is placed in its preconceived position, the masculine authority is kept safe, since the heroine fulfills the prototypical characteristics of the idealized woman by the ideology of male domination: family woman, well-behaved girl, repressed sexuality and straight moral principles. The heroine Charlotte is rescued by the hero Redmond from a trap maliciously prepared by the demonic Felicia. Charlotte and Redmond get married and Felicia, insane, dies tragically in the maze.

Joan Foster states she is an artist of escapism. She needs to escape as much as her readers, exactly because her life is not a fairy-tale. She understands that escapist literature, in spite of repeating roles and preestablished female patterns in an essentially phalocratic world, touches her readers' sensibility, allowing pleasurable feelings to women who got married too early, who had children when they were still too young, who wanted a prince and enchanted castles but ended in tiny apartments with detestable husbands.

Once again we are to resort to Edgar Morin's enlightening arguments from the sociological perspective on the conflict between the feminine and the feminist viewpoints, that conflate within female culture. He states that the 'culture of femininity' develops within the means of mass communication, stressing the modalities of prestige a woman should go through in order to succeed in a male civilization. She should be beautiful, homely, motherly, a good cook, a believer in pure love, etc. In other words, whereas the 'culture of femininity' was

confined to private life, feminism looked forward to the woman's integration in public life, being thus one the reverse of the other. Because the 'culture of femininity' is embedded in mass culture, it confirms and imprisons the woman in her traditional roles. She can count only on the great valves of dream and romance: escapism, in other words. Feminism, on the other hand, wants to mobilize the woman, to shake her resignation and to put at stake such traditional roles. Only through the integration between femininity and feminism, between the feminist *intelligentsia* and the great female masses, can an ideology of the woman can be imposed upon society.¹⁷ *Lady Oracle* fictionally substantiates such socio-political approach.

Margaret Atwood acknowledges that the outstanding function of literary artistry is to release the readers' conscious minds, which only emancipating texts can afford. She has claimed in many critical essays that the power of fiction lies exactly on its possibility of leading the readers to see the world and themselves the way they really are, so that they modify their behavior.¹⁸

Thus, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* may be defined as an antigothic novel, for whereas she examines the dangers of the Gothic code, she inlays it in a verisimilar and coherent narrative. The Gothic ideation becomes totally frustrated and improbable. Molly Hite manages to sum up what Atwood's novel is about:

While *Lady Oracle* incorporates elements of many genres, it is certainly a *Künstlerroman*, a portrait of the artist as a young woman, and as such resists the unequivocal privileging of a "real self" when one implied opposite is the persona created by the imagination and of a "real world" when one implied opposite is fiction. More insidiously, this kind of reading involves...gender-coded assumptions about the representation of "woman" in fictional discourse and the representation of female authorship in critical discourse. (131)

By the end of the novel, Joan Foster, now lured by the opportunity of having a love affair with an unknown journalist who unveils her “true identity”, plays with the idea of stopping writing Costume Gothics to start experimenting in science fiction. If the Gothic points out the mythical past, Sci-Fi leads to dreams of a utopic world in the future, what could keep her readers enraptured in illusion.¹⁹ Nevertheless, what really matters is that Foster does not give up writing. As a gifted and aggressive writer, she will not lose any opportunity of undermining the literary code when the aim is to offer her public the chance of “living more than one life.” More important than that, she knows how to make a female reader realize what kind of character best suits her own approach to life.

Indeed, by displaying critically the mechanisms used in the composition of popular fiction, Atwood denudes it of all its enchanting, magical and alienating power.

Notes

- 1 Margaret Atwood. *Lady Oracle* (London: Virago, 1985). Page numbers of quotations from the novel are indicated in parentheses.
- 2 “Metafiction is fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity,” cf. Hutcheon 1. The author also identifies such kind of fiction as “narcissistic narrative” and uses the following adjectives to describe it: self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational. See also Wenche Ommundsen, *Metafictions? Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).
- 3 In general terms, the Gothic novel “is a form of novel in which magic, mystery, and chivalry are the chief characteristics. Horrors abound: one may expect a suit of armor suddenly to come to life, while ghosts, clanking chains, and charnel houses impart an uncanny atmosphere of terror,” cf. Holman 204. Our interest, however, is the “female Gothic” which, according to Ellen Moers’ perspective “is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic...it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace,

and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare" (138). Joan Foster's novels follow the female Gothic tradition after Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1798), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), among others. See also the discussion on the female Gothic by Ruthven 118-119.

- 4 By *stereotype* we understand "the metal duplication of a printing surface, cast from a mold made of the surface, usually by wet paper pulp. A *stereotype* plate enables the original surface to be exactly duplicated many times. By extension, *stereotype* has come to mean anything that repeats or duplicates something else without variation; hence something that lacks individualizing characteristics. The term is applied to commonly held and oversimplified mental pictures or judgments of a person, a race, an issue, a kind of art, etc," cf. Holman 427.
- 5 *Archetype*, a term brought into literary criticism from Jungian psychology, holds that "behind each individual's unconscious—the blocked-off memory of our racial past... makes effective for us a group of "primordial images" shaped by the repeated experience of our ancestors and expressed in myths, religions, dreams, fantasies, and literature. The "primordial image" is called the *archetype*, cf. Holman 34. See also Jung 13, 103, 108.
- 6 We have chosen the term "mass literature" as the concept that implies the fiction that built on "identical pattern of events within the plot allows the reader to find, through identifying with the characters, a continual confirmation of his own personality," cf. Kaupp 234. However, there is a great terminological variety to identify "entertainment literature," such as trivial literature, popular literature, best-seller literature, commercial literature, mass produced self-confirming literature, marginal literature, among others. The meanings implied in each term are deeply discussed by Peter Kaupp in his article. For such purpose, it is also useful the discussion on "Mass culture and 'levels' of culture" by Umberto Eco, *Apocalípticos e integrados*. Trans. Pérola de Carvalho (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1987), 33-68.
- 7 See for this purpose Shirley H. Heller, *20th Century American Women Authors: A Feminist Approach* (New York: Monarch, 1975) 1-17.
- 8 Ken Davis also shares with these critics the view that books can both reveal the fundamental values with which the culture operates, and dialectically can have a profound effect on the readers both as spectators (mass literature readers) and/or participants (highbrow literature readers). He states that: "I begin with this simple

assertion: books can change people and societies. ..Those and others like them were the books that made the Paperback Revolution a living, pulsing force in contemporary America. They helped shape a culture and very often showed where it was heading. (xi,xv)

- 9 *cf.* Hannoosh 113, "A major aspect of parody to emerge from recent theoretical considerations of the genre is its essential reflexivity, its capacity to reflect critically back upon itself, not merely upon its target."
- 10 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (England: Penguin, 1985). Page numbers of quotations from the novel are indicated in parentheses.
- 11 *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796) by Fanny Burney; *Belinda* (1801) by Maria Edgeworth.
- 12 Hannoosh 120.
- 13 See the interesting analysis of the effects of the dance on Joan's personality by Sharon Rose Wilson, "Dancing for Others: The triple Goddess and "The Red Shoes," _____. Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993) 35-82.
- 14 See the analysis on the metaphor of water in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and other female novels by Ann-Janine Morey, *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 212-235.
- 15 Expression coined by Coral Ann Howells as we read *apud* Lorna Sage. *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 162: "Coral Ann Howells, in her 1987 study of Canadian women novelists, *Private and Fictional Words* (London: Methuen, 1987)⁴, finds that what female and Canadian identities have in common is 'an awareness of instability' - [Atwood] has moved through and beyond the primitivist myth of wilderness".
- 16 "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle: Writing against Notions of Unity*," *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*, ed. Colin Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994) 133.
- 17 See for this purpose Morin (1986) 156-173.

18 cf. Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?" *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) 345: "Reading is also a process and it also changes you. You aren't the same person after you've read a particular book as you were before, and you will read the next book, unless both are the Harlequin Romances, in a slightly different way. When you read a book, it matters how old you are and when you read it and whether you are male or female, or from Canada or India. There is no such thing as a truly universal readers. It is my contention that the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist."

19 In 1985, Margaret Atwood published the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopia.

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