

# “Lady Oracle”: The Politics of the Body

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I search instead for the others  
the ones left over,  
the ones who have escaped from these  
mythologies with barely their lives

MARGARET ATWOOD, *You Are Happy*

MARGARET ATWOOD wrote these words as if they were spoken by the Circe persona in the “Circe/Mud Poems” section of her book of poetry called *You Are Happy*. Atwood’s career as poet, storyteller, and critic has been a coming to terms with “these mythologies,” a general term for myths about women and myths about gender relations which have been inscribed in our literature. Her career has been also a search for an escape from “these mythologies.” Although numerous critics have analyzed Atwood’s work with myths about women, their readings have been limited to primarily psychological interpretations. For the many women who have escaped “with barely their lives,” however, cultural myths about women are very much a form of “power politics.” To do justice to Atwood’s work, we must look beyond psychology to the politics of her work with — and against — myth.

By far the most potent myth in Atwood’s imagination has been the White Goddess, a multi-faceted myth which reflects socially constructed images of women’s roles. Ever since Atwood’s first reading of Robert Graves’s book, *The White Goddess*, when she was of college age, this Goddess has shadowed her thinking. One could easily argue that even her most recent novel, *Cat’s Eye* (1988), is a reworking of goddess images. In fact, while she was working on *Cat’s Eye*, which is a novel of retrospectives, Atwood wrote a retrospective on her own career for *Ms.* magazine’s fifteenth-anniversary issue. She described the influence of the Goddess:

I read Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* which . . . terrified me. Graves . . . placed women right at the center of his poetic theory, but they were to be inspirations rather than creators. . . . They were to be incarnations of the White Goddess herself, alternatively loving and destructive. . . . A woman just might — might, mind you — have a chance of becoming a decent poet, but only if she took on the attributes of the White Goddess and spent her time seducing men and then doing them in. . . . White Goddesses did not have time for children, being too taken up with cannibalistic sex. (79)

The depth of Atwood's early obsession with this Goddess can be assessed by noting that her unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" (Atwood Papers), revolves around the idea of supernatural women and goddesses as manifestations of ideas about nature. Remnants of this thesis are visible in published materials such as "Superwoman Drawn and Quartered: The Early Forms of *She*" and "The Curse of Eve," as well as the chapter on fictional women in *Survival*, her survey of Canadian literature. *Double Persephone*, Atwood's first collection of poetry, reflects the Demeter/Persephone myth, while other poetry, especially the "Circe/Mud Poems," utilizes the Goddess figure.

Robert Graves's version of the Goddess is a figure descended from earth mothers and grain goddesses from the matriarchal past, yet she often eats children, even her own. As Artemis or Diana, one of her major "incarnations," she is associated with the moon, and therefore is seen in three phases: virginity, fecundity, and hag. The Goddess is ambivalent, "both lovely and cruel, ugly and kind" (248). Most important for Graves, she is *the* Muse, worshipped by all great poets. "Woman," writes Graves, "is not a poet: she is either a silent muse or she is nothing" (446). The domestic is the enemy of the poetic for Graves; the worst thing that could happen to a poet would be that some "domestic Woman" would turn him into a "domesticated man" (449). "The White Goddess is anti-domestic," he writes; "she is the perpetual 'other woman'" (449).

The myth of the White Goddess condenses, as myths do, many of the deepest, often unarticulated fears of women and men. Atwood's project is in part to articulate, to give form to, those

fears — through reworking images of the Goddess. In her own versions of the Goddess, Atwood condenses fears of being large and fat, fears of being powerful, fears of devouring or overpowering lovers and children, and the fear of being a writer. Finally, because she is the Triple Goddess, of multiple identities, she represents the difficulty of coming to a sense of one "true" single identity, the Self, a goal which Western culture has invoked as the great desideratum.

Evidence in the Atwood collection of manuscript drafts and files of research materials (in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library) indicates that Atwood's novels are written both in terms of and also "against" the Goddess. I read Atwood's work as an attempt to come to grips with the hidden agendas of patriarchy, with socially constructed myths about women. Thinking back to Barthes's definitions of myth in *Mythologies*, that myth is "depoliticized speech" (143) which "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (142), then the myth of the White Goddess represents exactly the sort of "depoliticized speech" which has historically been used to define, limit, and disempower women. She is one major instance of the myths, legends, and texts which have been used as tools in women's subordination. Atwood has begun to deconstruct, historicize, and reappropriate the myth of the Goddess; she has begun, in short, to politicize it.

While in her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), Margaret Atwood transformed Robert Graves's fearsome "White Goddess" into a "delicious" cake, *Lady Oracle* (1976) represents a second major attempt to deal with the Goddess, who is in this text more powerful than ever before. Atwood comes to terms with the most terrifying aspect of the Goddess in the Graves text, the devouring, powerful cannibalistic Venus who mates with men and eats them. She is the power of nature made visible, and the poet's necessary muse.

*Lady Oracle* is a representation of the narrator's attempt to act out the role of the Goddess. By having her narrator become the Goddess, Margaret Atwood takes on the issue of cultural control of women (and women's bodies) as represented in literature and in prescribed images or roles for women; she does combat with

Graves in particular and patriarchy in general. Atwood's reading of Graves emphasizes two aspects: the cannibalistic nature of the Goddess and her role as silent Muse. The poetic vocation is thus a key to *Lady Oracle*, and a continuation of the discussion about the relationship between the artist and her world raised in *Surfacing*, Atwood's second novel. How can a woman inhabit the space of literature without being overwhelmed by the ideological preconceptions of that literature? How can a modern woman live without becoming a victim of the ideological constructs of the Western world?

*Lady Oracle*, Atwood's third novel, is about the eating woman. The heroine, Joan Delacourt Foster, is an avid consumer who literalizes the "oral" in "oracle." As a noticeably overweight child, she imagines her mother's image of her, which "must have been a one-hole object, like an inner tube, that took things in at one end but didn't let them out at the other" (93). As she grew older, her mother "was tired of having a teen-aged daughter who looked like a beluga whale and never opened her mouth except to put something in it" (78). Although Joan diets away her one hundred pounds of excess weight, she is occasionally haunted by nightmares of her fat childhood body and by meeting people who might remember her "Before" self. She earns her living writing "Costume Gothics," formulaic romance novels; sections of her latest book, *Stalked By Love*, are interpolated into *Lady Oracle*.

Joan's husband, a serious academic and political radical, does not even know about her Gothic romances; he also does not know that she is having an affair with "The Royal Porcupine," an avant-garde artist. He does know that she is becoming famous for a book published under her married name, a volume of automatic-writing poetry called "Lady Oracle." Then a blackmailer threatens to reveal Joan's multiple identities. In an effort to disentangle herself from her complicated life, she enacts an imitation drowning death, flies to Italy, and buries her wet "drowning" costume, planning to begin a new life as easily as she usually begins writing a new book.

The Goddess is such a significant image to *Lady Oracle* that Atwood's research materials for the novel consist primarily of photocopied articles and references to the Goddess and to the Sibyl

(another form of the Goddess). Basing my analysis upon the materials in these files, I argue against purely psychological explanations of Atwood's use of the mythological material, the route chosen by critics such as Barbara Godard, Roberta Sciff-Zamaro, and Sherrill Grace.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the Goddess has both political and aesthetic dimensions for Atwood — she represents women's fears, but she also represents cultural constructions of women's roles. As Susan J. Rosowski notes, "In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood turns this tradition back upon itself, confronting the Gothic dimensions that exist within our social mythology" (197) because "[o]nce established, fictional constructs become impervious to human reality" (200).

Perhaps the most striking item in Atwood's research materials for *Lady Oracle* is the photocopy of a photo of a statue of the Goddess, labelled "Mother Nature," but generally known as the Artemis of Ephesus. This statue is, serendipitously, located within the enormous maze of the Villa d'Este, which she calls in her screenplay version of *Lady Oracle*, "the Tivoli Gardens, built by a Renaissance Cardinal for his dirty-weekend-palace. The Gardens are filled with statues that squirt water from various orifices of their bodies, run by hydraulic pressure" (Box 63, 1980, First Draft of *Lady Oracle* screenplay). Atwood uses this figure in the published novel as part of the scenery. On a vacation in Italy, Arthur and Joan are wandering in the Villa D'Este when they suddenly come upon the Goddess:

She had a serene face, perched on top of a body shaped like a mound of grapes. She was draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws: little breasts at the top and bottom, big ones around the middle. The nipples were equipped with spouts, but several of the breasts were out of order. (282)<sup>2</sup>

This is a significantly more provocative image of the White Goddess than that in the Graves text; Graves stresses the role of the Goddess as a beautiful muse and as a destroyer of men and children, but ignores her "nature goddess" shape. If we think critically about this passage, what stands out is the difference between the "serene" head and the incredibly grotesque body. Unlike the other statues in the Gardens, with normal human bodies

attached to normal human heads, this monstrosity encapsulates the complete lack of fit between mind and body. The contrast emphasizes "Mother Nature's" (and woman's) alienation from her own body, as if the female function of the body (childbearing and breast-feeding) had gone completely out of control, usurping every other function. To have breasts, to be female, is compared by Atwood to a disease, yaws. And the unreliability of the female body is emphasized by the note that "several of the breasts were out of order." This cultural limitation of the female body is part of what troubles Joan Foster.

Chapter 25 of the published version of *Lady Oracle* concludes with the passage quoted above followed by a short paragraph in which the narrator says that she

stood licking my ice-cream cone, watching the goddess coldly. Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not any more. My ability to give was limited, I was not inexhaustible. I was not serene, not really. I wanted things, for myself. (282)

The complacent and distant attitude of the narrator in this published version is a reworking of a page of loose typescript in the files for *Lady Oracle* which gives a much more troubled version of this scene. It is apparent in the published version that Atwood has chosen to define the narrator as a person whose personal boundaries and self-definition are clear. In quite an opposite way the *unpublished* material emphasizes the conflicts, fears, and desires of Joan Delacourt Foster.<sup>3</sup>

If two breasts are a virtue in woman, why not three, why not a hundred? We stood hand in hand, licking up the last of our vanilla ice cream, regarding the goddess, who did not regard us. Her head rose from its nest of breasts like the head of a beautiful leper. What prayers could be addressed to such a deity? Something easy for the breasts to understand for the head was merely human, the body divine, its deformity made this obvious. Something repetitive and monosyllabic. Give. Give. (Box 23)

The interesting complexity in this section is that the point of view is not strictly limited. There is a dangerous sympathy with the Goddess, a connection that is too close. The narrator seems to be in part imagining herself as the Goddess, constantly asked to "Give. Give."

The emotional entanglement is signalled by the complex, contradictory language, the oxymoronic phrases: "a beautiful leper," the "body divine [because of] its deformity." The conflicting, intertwined emotions, the fear that one *is* the Goddess, the longing *for* the Goddess, the desire to escape *from* the Goddess, are all captured here. The very complexity of point of view, the multiple, mutually antagonistic desires suggest that the character of Joan Delacourt Foster which finally emerges in the published novel is in some sense a distillation of even wilder and less controlled versions.

The unpublished quotation continues in an even more vivid imaginative sequence:

An image of inexhaustibility, and you looked at her with a certain longing, or so I imagined. Yet several of the breasts were not working, and the rest merely dribbled; think about that, the next time you treat a woman as the incarnation of the dream of largesse, and that goes for both of you. I know that I was two things for you, what you saw and what you would rather have seen; but how can I complain? We are never adequate to the dreams of others and these dreams infest our lives, like termites, like bloodworms. Any of these dreams come true would be a monster. Who carved this goddess? I can imagine her coming to life, reeling topheavily down the street, every breast wobbling, sprinkling lawns and flower borders as she passes, like a new portable irrigation system, her nurturing face twisted into a different expression, rage, the desire for revenge, seeking her creator. Women scream, men laugh in [page ends] (Box 23)

Leaving aside the issue of the addressee, the emotional weight of this passage in the final lines is terror, "women scream," a cry that may or may not have been displaced from the narrator onto other women. The terror is both personal and generic, both generalized fear of the Goddess as a "type," and also the particular fear of the narrator. The Goddess resembles not just a mythological figure, but also Joan's own former self, "reeling topheavily down the street." The Goddess is a terrible vision because of her "rage," "the desire for revenge." She is monstrous and linked to monsters — yet as a mythological archetype she is supposed to be *the* female, that which is part of, or a possibility in, every woman. Paradoxically, the narrator's fear is mixed with, as she says, "a certain

longing," associated with the fact that she is "licking up the last of [her] ice cream," and worrying that the breasts are not inexhaustible. But these desires are repressed. The longing for breast milk, while licking on the breast-shaped and disappearing ice-cream cone, is transformed in the published version into an association with cold rather than nourishment, as the narrator watches "the goddess coldly" (282).

We can see the degree to which the Goddess figure becomes a generalized "sign" of myths about women by connecting this unpublished material to Joan's attempt to bury her clothes, her former identity. The heroine has dug a hole under her rented "villa" in Italy in order to bury the wet clothes that were evidence of her faked death. Then she begins to imagine that the clothes are a buried body and that she is a murderer: "The clothes were my own, I hadn't done anything wrong, but I still felt as though I was getting rid of a body, the corpse of someone I'd killed" (18). In fact, three hundred pages later, the clothes do return to haunt her. Her landlord's father digs them up and returns them, revealing the fact that he and the townspeople had been aware of her "buried" identity all along. But just before Mr. Vitroni returns the clothes, Joan has a revealing nightmare which ties together the buried clothes, her imaginary buried "body," and her vision of herself as fat.

Below me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I'd buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself out, like a huge blind mole, slowly and painfully shambling up the hill to the balcony . . . a creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine and which must have gone somewhere. It would have no features, it would be smooth as a potato, pale as starch, it would look like a big thigh, it would have a face like a breast minus the nipple. (353; ellipses in original)

The text has conflated the buried or murdered "body" with Joan's dieted-off fat. But there is also a striking similarity between "the creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine" and the Goddess partially suppressed earlier, who came "reeling top-heavily down the street," making every woman scream. The multiple breasts have been turned into a "face like a breast minus the



nipple." She is enormously fat, featureless, wandering blindly "like a huge mole" as if she were magnetically attracted to Joan, as if she *were* Joan.

These passages constitute a climax to Atwood's ongoing obsession with the function of the Goddess as a "sign" of "woman" and of female possibility. They signify the terror of women, their fear that their own female bodies will overpower their minds, will search them out and destroy their lives — or that their bodies will become alienated from their heads, that their bodies will be "composed of flesh" which will "have no features." What is common to all of these terrifying images is the exaggerated size, the inhuman disproportion of the breast-covered Goddess, as if the fact of having a female body overpowered any other personal characteristics. As Atwood noted so clearly in her 1987 retrospective, "Great Unexpectations," the images of what a woman could be scared her "to death." If women actually incarnated the characteristics attributed to them in myths such as the White Goddess, then one would not want to be female.

What is perhaps most significant, then, in the Artemis of Ephesus statue and in Atwood's writing about that statue is what we might call its "essentialism," that it *reduces* "Nature" to "Woman" (and "Woman" to "Nature"), that it defines both "Woman" and "Nature" by one characteristic (nourishment), and that the result is completely grotesque. It is as if Atwood took the most ludicrous examples of women embodying nature in the nineteenth-century romances she had studied in her doctoral dissertation, and then pushed those even further towards the grotesque. In a similar fashion, the philosophical import of Joan's childhood and adolescent obesity (and of her adult obsession with that discarded "Fat Lady") is that it is a sign, a grotesque reduction, of an individual to one single characteristic which erases all other meanings. This essentialism is perfectly incarnated in Joan's nightmare of the "body" which the clothes have grown, which has "no features," is "smooth as a potato," with "a face like a breast minus the nipple" (353). As Molly Hite remarks, "this is a book in which fat is a feminist issue, and in which excess of body becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions it deems appropriate" (131-32).

I have argued that Atwood sees amazing power in the White Goddess, but that in *Lady Oracle* she manages to take control over the goddess by rendering her powerless, even ridiculous. The "Fat Lady" in the pink skating costume, the sequence in which Felicia turns fat (355), the comic incident with the arrow in Joan's rear end, even — perhaps especially — the scene in which Joan and Arthur lick ice cream cones in front of the Goddess; these all appropriate and domesticate the Goddess. The powerless Goddess is even found inside of Joan's Costume Gothic, *Stalked by Love*, disguised as one of four women who sits in the maze; she is the one who is "enormously fat." The novel both constructs the Goddess and trivializes her, takes power over her, uses her. She may be a sign, but she is also just a sign.

Earlier I defined the myth of the White Goddess, using Barthes's terminology, as "depoliticized speech" (142) which "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (142). Atwood's approach to mythologizing and essentializing of "woman" is to appropriate, deconstruct and domesticate that myth. Using Susan McKinstry's observation that Joan "is, precisely, a character" who has turned herself into fiction (66), we can see this manoeuvre as *political*, as turning the powerful Goddess into a figure one can control, manipulate, and parody. When Judith McCombs writes of *Lady Oracle* that "this is myth and genre upside-down, reflexive, parodied" ("Portraits" 76), one can think about those moves (parody, turning a genre upside-down) as acts of appropriation of cultural myths about women. If we look at the context in which Atwood wrote the novel, it is clear that the story may be interpreted as political, as taking seriously the social construction of "woman," especially the goddess figure, and rendering that construction powerless.

Thus far, I have noted the stimulating effect which the figure of the Goddess has on Atwood's imagination and have pointed towards evidence that this figure represents a kind of uncontrolled power which the text both uses and attempts to contain. The problem with the Goddess figure, as represented up until now, is her silence. Each image of the Goddess is speechless, inarticulate. She may have an expressive face, but she never shouts, curses, or yells,

much less writes. She is, in short, Graves’s perfect White Goddess, completely the Muse, never the inspired, never the poet.

Atwood solves the problem of the silenced Goddess by giving her a voice — by turning her into Joan Foster, author. We readers hear the Goddess speak through Joan. She tells us, at least, her side(s) of the story. Atwood’s act of giving voice to the Goddess, her destruction of the myth of the silent Goddess, is enabled to some extent by additional material about the Goddess provided by her researcher. While one aspect of “woman” is epitomized by the silent statue, reduced to the single function of nurturing, other attributes are possible. The research file contains numerous entries from encyclopedias, dictionaries, and classical works which emphasize the role of the Goddess as “Sibyl,” her position as “oracle.” It includes excerpts from Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book XIV), both of which concern the incident in which Aeneas consults the Sibyl in order to discover how to find his dead father’s shade; the Sibyl gives information and prophesies at length. Some of the references discuss Diana or Artemis; others mention the Delphic oracle, naming Daphnis and Pythia; Ovid and Virgil simply call her “Sibyl.”

Other names for the Goddess were Proserpine and Hecate, and the research even includes sketches of two statues of this triple Goddess. One entry notes that the “most famous of her temples was that of Ephesus. . . . She was there represented with a great number of breasts, and other symbols which signified the earth, or Cybele” (Box 13, Research Materials 204). The entry concludes with remarks that allude to a certain bloodthirstiness on the part of the Goddess, that some worshippers “cruelly offered on her altar all the strangers that were shipwrecked on their coasts” and that she “had some oracles” (Box 13, Research Materials 204).

Another entry from the *Classical Dictionary*, on “Pythia,” describes in detail how “Pythia, the priestess of Apollo at Delphi” would deliver her oracle:

. . . she was supposed to be suddenly inspired by the sulphureous vapours which issued from the hole of a subterranean cavity within the temple, over which she sat bare on a three-legged stool, called a tripod. In this stool was a small aperture, through which the vapour was inhaled by the priestess, at the divine inspiration, her

eye suddenly sparkled, her hair stood on end, and a shivering ran over all her body. In this convulsive state she spoke the oracles of the god, often with loud howlings and cries, and her articulations were taken down by the priest, and set in order. (Box 13, Research Materials 539)

The similarity between Pythia's inspiration and Joan's "automatic writing" of "Lady Oracle" is quite striking; it is clear that Joan is acting as a sort of oracle. Her three-sided mirror substitutes for the tripod, the candle for the vapour, and her automatic writing takes the place of the priest.

But Joan is also partly modelled upon the Cumean Sibyl, an oracle of Apollo who spoke to Aeneas. Atwood used this excerpt from the C. Day Lewis translation of the *Aeneid*, with the Sibyl speaking from a cave:

The Sibyl cried, "for lo! the god is with me. And speaking/  
There by the threshold, her features, her colours were all at once/  
Different, her hair flew wildly about; her breast was heaving,  
Her fey heart swelled in ecstasy; larger than life she seemed,  
More than mortal her utterance:

(Box 13, Research Materials 119)

The significance of this Sibyl is that she is able to lead Aeneas into the underworld; her power opens up the "maze" of Hades, just as Joan's experiments with her candle and triple mirror conjure up a goddess/guide: "she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat" (249).

The intriguing connection between the marked excerpt from the *Aeneid* and Joan's Costume Gothic romances is almost parodic, since the romances make a formulaic routine of the heaving breast and flying hair. Yet the Cumean Sibyl does retain the power of prophecy and speech. She is woman unsilenced; in another passage from Atwood's excerpts from the *Aeneid*, "her voice came booming out of the cavern, / Wrapping truth in enigma; she was possessed" (Box 13, Research Materials 120).

The most significant materials of all are the xeroxed references (both from Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*) to the silencing of the oracles which had belonged to women — in other words, to women's loss of the power of the word. In Graves's section on

"Oracles," for example, he notes that "The Delphic Oracle first belonged to Mother Earth, who appointed Daphnis as her prophetess; and Daphnis, seated on a tripod, drank in the fumes of prophecy, as the Pythian priestess still does" (Box 13, Research Materials 178). Graves then suggests alternative explanations of why Mother Earth no longer controls the oracle, and the final explanation, that the priests of "Apollo robbed the oracle" (Box 13, Research Materials 178) seems definitive. This conclusion is substantiated by a note on the following pages that all "oracles were originally delivered by the Earth-goddess, whose authority was so great that patriarchal invaders made a practice of seizing her shrines and either appointing priests or retaining the priestess in their own service" (Box 13, Research Materials 180-81).

Margaret Atwood seems to be attempting to recover the Oracular or the Sibyllic role of the Goddess, to undo the overthrow of the "woman" (not lady) oracle by the priests of Apollo, and to reinstate the Goddess who is a poet. Paradoxically, she is empowered by the writings of Robert Graves, who most forcefully presented Atwood with her problem in her early years. By looking back to the legends of the original transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, Atwood is placing the almost trivial, definitely comic, story of Joan Delacourt Foster within the much more cosmic frame of the gendered arrangements of contemporary culture, which even today keep women as merely the priestesses and the Muses of patriarchal writing. These research materials, in other words, remind us that Atwood's primary obsession, as she framed it in *Ms.* magazine, is with the representation of the Goddess as the muse of the male poet, with Graves's contention that a woman could not be a poet. But what even Graves's own notes on "Oracles" hypothesize, and what the *Aeneid* demonstrates, is the power of a woman's voice, of the woman oracle, when she is allowed to speak.

I believe that if we think of the novel *Lady Oracle* as having sprung, in some sense, from musings upon the mythology of Artemis/Diana, Hecate/Mother Nature as represented in these excerpts and illustrations, then it becomes even more clear that one of the aims of the text is to re-imagine the Delphic oracle again under the control of women. This is a figurative way of saying that the novel is attempting to imagine a way in which women can

take back their rightful place as poets and writers. We can think of the various modes of writing in *Lady Oracle* as musings upon the place of gender in the politics of literary production, or even as musings upon the place of literary production in the realm of sexual politics. If we return to the published novel, we can see evidence that Atwood is, indeed, articulating the difficulties for women writers in assuming an equal place in the marketplace of literary production.

In *Lady Oracle*, the domination of publishing by editors who are primarily interested not in quality of writing but in sales, not in feminism but in money, is represented by John Morton, Doug Sturgess, and Colin Harper, the men who decide to publish Joan's poem. Sturgess's reduction of Joan Foster to a seductive object to decorate the bookjacket is typical: "Don't you worry your pretty head about good. We'll worry about good, that's our business, right?" (252). Not only do men control women writers, but in addition, the modes of writing and creative expression practiced by men are presented as inherently repulsive: Fraser Buchanan's blackmail letters and avant-garde poetry of rejection slips, and the Royal Porcupine's "poetry" of frozen dead animals. This "art" is a burlesque, as McCombs says, of "*Survival's* colonial mentality, victims, dead animal and frozen Nature stories" ("Portraits" 77), but it is nevertheless unappealing to a woman writer. If we take these examples as representative, the role of men in the politics of literary production is to exploit women and animals.

Can women writers then enter into political writing? Atwood discusses this possibility through her description of *Resurgence*, the "small Canadian-nationalist left-wing magazine" which Arthur, Sam, and Don write. This journal provides an alternative form of literary production, and the fact that Marlene is the managing editor emphasizes the point that women can enter this sort of literary marketplace. Within the context of the novel, however, *Resurgence* becomes a joke because of the maelstrom created by the sexual politics of its staff, the merry-go-round of beds. Further, as Joan points out "Nobody . . . read *Resurgence* except the editors, some university professors, and all the rival radical groups who edited magazines of their own and spent a third of each issue

attacking each other" (275). Thus, as of 1976, Atwood did not see political writing as an attractive field for writing women.

Rejecting avant-garde art and political commentary, one discovers that the formulaic romance is possibly the most appealing field for women writers, so available to women that Paul has to disguise himself as Mavis Quilp in order to have his novels accepted. Further, as McCombs reminds us, the genre is definitely "natural" to Canada, since Harlequins are "Canada's most viable literary art, and a major publishing export" ("Portraits" 76). With female authors, female protagonists, and an enormous female audience, the market is ready for use.

At one point, Joan even considers the possibility of recuperating the Costume Gothic for political purposes. She knows that these formulaic stories (as compared to *Resurgence*) actually appeal to the masses which the left-wing radicals believe they want to reach: "*Terror at Casa Loma*, I'll call it, I would get in the evils of the Family compact, the martyrdom of Louis Riel, the horror of colonialism, both English and American, the struggle of the workers, the Winnipeg General Strike" (275).<sup>4</sup>

The idea of the power of the cheap romance remains as one of the pleasures of reading *Lady Oracle*. The interpolated scenes from Joan's novel in progress are vividly written and enticing enough to engender desire for a satisfactory resolution of the plot, so that even the sophisticated reader feels the attraction of the genre. Her allusions to *fotoromanzi*, Italian love stories written almost like comic strips with voice balloons, but photograph pictures, point to a similar genre. In Margaret Atwood's letter to "Donya" requesting research materials for *Lady Oracle*, she specifically requested a copy of a "*photoromanza*": "In case you don't know what these are, they are cheesy magazines, sort of like True Romances except that the story is told in still black & white photos, with captions & cartoon balloons. The cheesier the better, and if you find several equally cheesy ones, buy all of them" (Box 27, Correspondence, 16 Jan. 1974 letter to Donya). No actual *fotoromanzi* have been preserved in the files but these "cheesy" romances, mentioned several times in *Lady Oracle*, have characteristics which clearly appeal to Joan: "The stories were all of torrid passion, but the women and men never had their mouths

open . . . Italy was more like Canada than it seemed at first. All the screaming with your mouth closed" (206).

Yet it is the popular appeal and the ephemeral nature of the *fotoromanzi* which distinguish them from high culture. With *Lady Oracle* and Joan's poem of the same name, Atwood begins her search for a mode of artistic expression which is anti-*élitist* in that it is deliberately designed for wide appeal, open to women authors and women characters, and which can also be opened up for larger purposes than escape.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Joan Foster's creation of her Gothic romances and her oracle poem is a story, like that of Atwood's strategies for appropriating to herself the potent image of the Goddess, in which the artist takes to herself the power of the Sibyl. Although the critic Frank Davey argues that, as a narrator, Joan is "drowning in language" (76), we could also say that she is letting loose the power of language.

The power of the Sibyl, however, is an ambiguous power. It is like the power of the mother, the power of creation. Yet on the other hand, it is also a giving away of one's self. Out of Joan's subconscious comes "Lady Oracle," and after Joan's supposed suicide has been publicized in the media, the poem is turned into an item for popular consumption: "Sales of *Lady Oracle* were booming, every necrophiliac in the country was rushing to buy a copy" (346).

The similarity between the many-breasted Goddess and the woman writer is apparent in this quoted sentence. Like the Goddess who offers her breasts, her substance, for public consumption, the poet offers herself, her ideas, her selves, and her fears for public consumption. Her novels or poems will be "condensed," "digested" by reviewers, "consumed" by the public, "devoured" by fans, "regurgitated" in literature classes — she will be metaphorically cannibalized.

Atwood is acutely aware of these possibilities. Her attention to the *fotoromanzi* suggests that she is meditating upon the role of the writer as producer of ephemera, thinking about the offering of a woman writer's created identities (of her "selves") for digestion by the public. The covers of Atwood's novels make the books



resemble supermarket literature, which one might pick up along with the bread, milk, and fruit. A recent series simply has Margaret Atwood’s face on every cover, as if the author were the product to be sold. The French language version of *Lady Oracle* has the real Margaret Atwood’s face in a circular frame next to a parody of Margaret Atwood’s face, with red hair and red eyebrows, in a rectangular frame.

Ultimately, I suggest, the writer is in the position of the narrator of the ice-cream-eating sequence, longing for the milk of an inexhaustible muse, Goddess and Mother, yet also in the position of the Goddess herself, constantly required to “Give. Give” of her self, to offer her heart to the public. An unpublished poem, entitled “Oracle Poem Three,” poignantly raises this issue:

What would you like today  
 you who sit in rows  
 and are bored  
 and are hungry?

Shall I describe a flower for you?  
 Shall I describe a ripple?  
 Would that make you feel better?  
 I can do either.

Or maybe you would like to kill me,  
 that would be fun,  
 that would be participation.

Then you could divide me  
 into segments, relics:  
 that’s what you do with saints,  
 it makes them last longer.

A finger  
 to take home and place under your pillow  
 and pray every night:  
 perhaps it will cure you —

But the heart, the golden heart,  
 that’s the element  
 you will squabble over:  
 wars have been fought for it.

You think it will be secret,  
 you think it will be magic,  
 with the valuable heart  
 you can do anything you want.

But when you dig it out  
 you are disappointed:  
 it's scarcely larger than a chicken liver,  
 it's pale, it's normal,

and when you've swallowed it  
 diamonds don't drop from your lips,  
 you can't hear the trees talking.

Is it because you have no faith?

(Box 13, material collected  
 for *You Are Happy*)

The Delphic oracle is again under the control of a woman, a sibyl. She speaks. She may be devoured, she may devour, but at least she speaks.

In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood both destroys the Goddess (parodies her, makes her trivial) and celebrates her oracular powers, the force of her language. The triumph of *Lady Oracle* is that finally, after years of obsession with the Goddess, Atwood confronts her in her most horrifying aspect and, in Barthes's terminology, "vanquishes [the] myth from the inside" (135).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Several critics have dealt specifically with the Goddess in *Lady Oracle*, emphasizing the psychological implications of a *triple* Goddess. Barbara Godard, for example, argues that Joan Delacourt Foster must learn to acknowledge her own multiplicity, her resemblance to the Triple Goddess, "that she, like the goddess in the mirror, is destructive as well as creative, the mothball as well as the butterfly" (23).

Other critics have identified the Goddess with Joan's mother, who is observed putting on makeup in her "three-sided mirror" over her vanity table. Roberta Sciff-Zamaro points out that the theme of *Lady Oracle* is a quest "to find her real hidden self out of a split identity . . . epitomized by the archetype of the Great Mother, or White Goddess, which recurs throughout the novel" (32). Sherrill Grace's perceptive analysis asks what "or who presides at the centre of Joan's maze? There are at least two possible answers — the Triple Goddess and Joan's selves — and they are connected" (121). While Roberta Rubenstein does not emphasize the goddess, she does lay a great deal of stress on boundary problems as signs of unresolved mother-daughter conflicts, and thus articulates her under-

standing of *Lady Oracle* as a novel in which the heroine is both identified with the mother (or "Great Mother") and in which she is fighting against that mother figure.

Two critics have investigated dimensions of the sexual politics in *Lady Oracle*. Sharon Wilson's "The Fragmented Self in *Lady Oracle*" notes that throughout the novel Atwood portrays "the dilemma of the women writer" (59). Emily Jensen ties the fairy tale "parable" within *Lady Oracle* (*The Red Shoes*, Andersen's "Little Mermaid" and Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott") to the contemporary fact of the "conflict that arises for the woman who is committed to her artistic career, but who also desires to live a conventional, socially acceptable life" (31). See also Kim Chernin's analysis, which connects eating disorders to a thwarted desire to write (24-25).

- <sup>2</sup> Classical scholars will note that these "breasts" are actually testicles; thus the Goddess should be much more frightening to men than to women. Nevertheless, Atwood never seems to discover this fact, so her writing about the Goddess is based on the idea of multiple breasts.
- <sup>3</sup> The first quoted sentence was extracted for use in *Bodily Harm* (1981), while the second became the germ of the published paragraph.
- <sup>4</sup> In the end, however, Joan decides that her plan for infiltrating the historical romance genre with a political agenda would not work. The formula is such that the story always provides an escape from reality, an illusion that all desires are fulfilled. This escape literature is so addictive, so absorbing, that when Joan is reading Paul's latest book, *Nurse of the High Arctic*, in the bathtub, she does not even hear a blackmailer break into her apartment. Thus, the genre as generally practiced works as a barrier against involvement in politics, rather than a catalyst towards involvement. Perhaps the much more disruptive structure of *Lady Oracle* represents Atwood's attempt to utilize the genre without simultaneously permitting the "escape" effect.
- <sup>5</sup> When Joan describes her fears about her poetic bestseller, she is also describing one aspect of Atwood's own tactic in writing *Lady Oracle*: "a standard Costume Gothic, but a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside-down somehow. There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the flights, the long death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love" (259). We could say something quite similar about *Lady Oracle* in almost every detail. Atwood is acknowledging the power of the Gothic formula, which is such that even in trying to escape that formula, her heroine repeats it.

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