

An abstract painting with vibrant colors and expressive brushstrokes. The composition is dominated by warm tones of yellow, orange, and red, with cooler tones of blue and grey. The brushwork is dynamic and layered, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of energy and emotional intensity.

# Fluid Constructs:

## Breaking the Limits of Gendered Spaces

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# **The Harbour**

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*The Harbour* is a bi-yearly, blind peer-reviewed graduate students journal launched by the English Graduate Students' Society (EGSS) at the Université de Montréal in 2020. Its purpose is to promote the diffusion of the work of students from Canadian and international universities on literature and other cultural productions and the role they play in a variety of cultural imaginaries. Each student contributing to the operations of the journal has specialized knowledge in specific fields such as Post-Colonial studies, Canadian studies, Indigenous studies, popular culture studies, and others. This offers diverse approaches in the journal's editorial vision throughout all of the journal's issues.

Université de Montréal is situated on land where, long before the arrival of the French, people of many Indigenous nations came together and interacted. We wish to acknowledge these nations, their descendants and the spirit of fraternity that presided over the signing in 1701 of the Great Peace of Montreal, a treaty that fostered peaceful relationships between France, its Indigenous allies and the Haudenosaunee federation (pronunciation: O-di-no-sho-ni). The spirit of fraternity that inspired this treaty serves as a model for our own university community.

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**Fluid Constructs:  
Breaking the Limits Gendered Space**

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# Editors' Introduction





The  
Harbour

—*Fluid Constructs*—

In this issue, we are proud to feature the voices of four scholars who have touched upon important and valuable aspects of gender and feminist studies. Roxanne Brousseau, a PhD student at the University of Montréal, is one of our guest editors and has written a fascinating article that illustrates the prominence of women’s violations, which seep into every aspect of our lives, including institutions originally designed to protect all citizens. “‘Gray’ Transgressions: Reading the Female Corpse in Kathy Reich’s *Déjà Dead*” investigates the gaze posed upon female bodies even after death. Ms. Brousseau argues that Reich’s novel is an example of a second violation, as understood in Alcott’s work on rape (2018). Nevertheless, Ms. Brousseau emphasizes that the protagonist, Dr. Brennan, embodies a critique of patriarchal institutions of criminal justice as a means to deny women agency, even after death.

We then have Aurora Kiser’s text “The Imaginary of ‘The Shrouded Woman’: A Liminal Transgressive Space Between the Symbolic and Death” determines the manner in which the female protagonist in *The Shrouded Woman* elevates female power by using the in-betweenness of consciousness and death to denounce patriarchal abuses. To follow, we have Jessica Banner’s “Shaping the ‘Now’: Feminist Reconfigurations of Linear Time in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*” which revisits the question of authorial voice in medieval literature. According to Ms. Banner, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, express the transgression of Alisoun’s social role by using time to create and transcend the authorial voice. Last but not least, Crystelle Cotnoir-Thériault contributes an analysis of violence and blood in Early Modern ironic writings about male sexual fantasies in her work “Sex, Blood and Violence in John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*”.

We conclude with an interview with our very own Professor Heather Meek, who offers graduate students advice on the path to publication.

It is our distinguished pleasure to present unto you our second issue: *Fluid Constructs: Breaking the Limits of Gendered Spaces*.

Hoda Agharazi and Camille Houle-Eichel  
Editors-in-Chief  
April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

# Essays

# “Gray” Transgressions: Reading the Female Corpse in Kathy Reichs’ *Déjà Dead*

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Roxanne Brousseau

## Abstract

Kathy Reichs’ thriller *Déjà Dead* (1997), which makes use of the author’s experiences as a forensic anthropologist, follows Dr. Temperance Brennan as she investigates a series of murders occurring during the summer of 1994 in Montreal. I will explore how the body functions as a sign that allows Dr. Brennan to uncover clues on the corpse and discover the culprit. I will argue that her inspection of the body becomes a second violation, akin to Linda Martín Alcoff’s understanding of rape in her work *Rape and Resistance* (2018). I further suggest that Dr. Brennan’s invasive treatment of the body entails that governmental institutions utilize similar methods as perpetrators. However, Reichs positions Dr. Brennan as a heroine rather than a criminal because of the latter’s ability to empathize with the female victims and her boundless desire to provide women with safety. Adopting a feminist approach, I contend that the novel allows Reichs to critique the patriarchal nature of the criminal justice system and reveal the transgressive quality of the institution’s post-mortem procedures that deny women agency over their bodies and voices.

The body, and more precisely the female corpse, functions as an interpretable sign in Reichs’ *Déjà Dead* (1997) that allows the detective—in this case, the forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance “Tempe” Brennan—to uncover the truth behind a series of murders occurring during the summer of 1994 in Montreal. Dr. Brennan must investigate the signs on and within the victim’s body to discover the truth and obtain justice. Her inspection of the body becomes a second violation, of which she is conscious and conflicted, and can, to some extent, be compared to Linda Martín Alcoff’s understanding of violation in her work *Rape and Resistance* (2018). This signifies

that perpetrator and the criminal justice system employ similar methods since both violate the body for specific purposes, but with drastically different outcomes, and these outcomes differentiate the detective from the criminal. Dr. Brennan respects and empathizes with her female victims, and hopes to provide safety for women, essentially making her a hero rather than a criminal. Reichs, herself a forensic anthropologist, employs feminist discourse in her novel to critique the criminal justice system and, more specifically, the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP), a patriarchal governmental institution, revealing, in *Déjà Dead*, the transgressive nature of post-

mortem procedures that deny women agency over their bodies and voices.

Dr. Brennan utilizes similar methods as the serial killer, Léo Fortier, during her examination of the victims' bodies (Isabelle Gagnon, Margaret Adkins, Chantale Trottier, Grace Damas, Francine Morisette-Champoux, and Gabrielle Macaulay), which demonstrates that the justice system, and the murderer similarly (mis)treat the body. Throughout the novel, Fortier stalks, tortures, murders, and often dismembers or decapitates his victims before disposing of the bodies in separate garbage bags, a process Dr. Brennan describes as "[v]ery tidy" (20). For instance, he uses a serrated knife to "cleanly sever [...] the hands" (23) and then the body is "dumped, naked and mutilated, stripped of everything that link[s] it to a life" (20). Dr. Brennan simultaneously reverses and reproduces this process. She unearths the body, transports it to the *Laboratoire de Médecine Légale (LML)*, and then proceeds to cleanse, position, and reconstruct the corpse. While she restores, in some sense, the body to its "natural" state, without being able to repair the damage Fortier caused, Dr. Brennan, like the serial killer, dismantles and dissects the body. She boils and splits bones and uses a scalpel to remove cartilage and muscle, causing extensive bodily damage (24). Her methods could, like Fortier, be described as "tidy." Pursuing this idea, Dr. Brennan precisely categorizes, identifies, describes, measures, and examines the corpse; she analyses X-rays and skeletal fractures, observes the body under a microscope, and stares into the body. These forceful inspections of the body resemble the manner in which Fortier pursues and preys upon victims, stalking and tracking the women and then recording their personal information. The body and its subsequent mutilations become a spectacle of sorts, just

as Horsley and Horsley describe in "Body Language: Reading the Corpse in Forensic Crime Fiction," such that autopsy procedures are "fully documented record[s] of the mutilation of the corpse, and hence, a recreation of the spectacle of bodily violence" (16). Both the forensic anthropologist and the serial killer have methodical minds and methods, which is further revealed in the way they both generate lists that contain the victims' personal information (Reichs 145).<sup>1</sup> Another similarity in their systematic approaches to the body manifests when Dr. Brennan labels and stores segments of bones in Ziploc bags at the LML, a standard procedure that resembles Fortier's meticulous disposal of bodies. Dr. Brennan implements procedures from forensic anthropology, and Fortier performs ritualistic murders, two routines that can be described as a series of actions conducted in a specific order. This recalls the unsettling explanation sexual homicide profiler John Samuel Dobzhansky offers, namely, that sexual sadists practice repetitive and systematic rituals (356-60). More troubling is that both involve violence.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, their treatment of the body is similar.

Dr. Brennan, however, examines the body not to cause harm but to find out the truth behind the murders. In other words, her motive is antithetical to Fortier. Her primary objective is to identify victims, that is, to transform a case number into a name, as she does with Gagnon, whose body was previously labelled case 26704 (18). Dr. Brennan iterates that "[n]othing else will matter until [the victim] has a name" (23). She re-associates the individual with the body, undoing Fortier's attempts to strip victims of their identities after murdering them. In this way, she ensures they do not die in anonymity. In this fashion, the body functions as a "corpse-as-

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<sup>1</sup> The investigative team discover "a crude spreadsheet containing personal data" about the victims. Dr. Brennan thinks that it "d[oes] not look unlike [her] own spreadsheet" (145).

<sup>2</sup> See Wiltse for more on seriality.

signifier” or a “corpse-as-text.”<sup>3</sup> Dr. Brennan often perceives the body as evidence, as evinced when she affirms that “to prevent more deaths,” she must “dig up more facts” (330). The body, in the novel, bears signs, especially signs of violence, that she must read, which corresponds to the detective, in traditional detective fiction, who must decipher clues at the crime scene. Conversely, the psychologically unstable Fortier murders women to perform a ritual that satisfies his sadistic compulsions, a proceeding Lee and Katharine Horsley describe as a redistribution of pain “by refashioning the bodies of his victims in the image of his own psychic wounds” (6). Fortier attempts to relocate or unburden his psychological disturbances onto the bodies of victims. The “writing” Fortier commits on bodies is then decoded by the forensic anthropologist. Writing becomes a destructive act, while reading becomes, to a considerable degree, restorative. Thus, the forensic anthropologist disinters victims, restores their identity, and seeks to prevent further harm, while Fortier commits homicides and conceals cadavers. Moreover, Dr. Brennan and Fortier perceive the body differently. The forensic anthropologist recognizes the life the body once held. For instance, when exhuming a corpse, she works deliberately to preserve the body, demonstrating her respect towards the deceased individual. Also, Dr. Brennan stores bones in Ziploc bags (which usually preserve food), and Fortier disposes of bodies in garbage bags (which are primarily used to discard waste); their respective receptacles reflect their polar perceptions of the value of bodies and the lives they contain. Their treatment of the body is, therefore, different in terms of intent and outcome.

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<sup>3</sup> Scaggs uses the term “corpse-as-signifier” (100). Horsley and Horsley use the term “corpse-as-text” (1). Both terms imply that the detective can read the body in the same way that one can read a text. See Hühn for more on the detective as reader.

Nevertheless, the procedures the QPP practices function as a second violation of the body. Alcoff defines violation as “to infringe upon someone, [or] to transgress” (9), and is, she claims, an act that involves a violation of “subjectivity” and “will” (10). Alcoff suggests utilizing the term “gray” (9) when the violation involves complexities, a term she borrows from Mary Gaitskill, who claimed in 1994 that “the binary categories of rape/not-rape were simply insufficient to classify the thick complexity of her own experience” as “the meaning of her experience felt ambiguous, resistant to closure, not black or white, but gray” (60). Given the intricacies of Dr. Brennan’s second violation of the body, most notably her conflicted feelings towards the procedures she practices and their requirement to obtain justice, the term “gray,” here, applies. Before following this idea further, it is necessary to specify that while corpses are not subjects per se, subjectivity, agency, and consent remain applicable. Agency, according to Alcoff, is deciding when to speak (43), which also includes the choice to remain silent. In this instance, speaking refers to the body’s capacity to disclose the story of the crime, which becomes problematic when victims do not possess the agency to consent to such invasive measures. The body becomes an object of study rather than a subject. Discussing the body’s role in crime fiction in “The Role of the Body in Forensic Crime Fiction,” an object, Miglė Anušauskaitė asserts, lacks agency (137). In the novel, the body undergoes subjection in death since the deceased individual has no power over their corpse.<sup>4</sup> Victims have no control over their bodies. Returning to the parallels between the post-mortem examination of the body and a second violation, Horsley and Horsley argue that “[a]utoptic

<sup>4</sup> See Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* for discussions of subjection, subjectivity, and subjectivation.

procedures and autopsy reports on the causes of death are still in their own way violations of the privacy of the dead body, producing it in the public arena – an ‘invitation to voyeurism’” (16). The procedures necessarily infringe upon the victim’s privacy and agency. Being voiceless, victims cannot consent or object to such measures. Horsley and Horsley also contend that “[t]he sheer violence of the procedures link[s] [the examiner] with the criminal act” (16). Distinctions between law enforcement and criminality become indistinct given that the criminal justice system and the criminal employ similar methods, transgressing the private space of the body as well as the individual’s agency. While the governmental institution may insist upon public interest,<sup>5</sup> claiming the victim has a moral and political responsibility to provide evidence for the police to apprehend the dangerous criminal, this is, once more, a violation of will.

As a result, Dr. Brennan’s examination of the body can be considered, to a certain extent, a second violation, given that she unwittingly infringes upon the individual’s agency and will and transgresses every boundary of personal space, and this, when the victim no longer has the agency to offer consent. The forensic anthropologist describes the public nature of her work: “The body is handled, scrutinized, and photographed [...] The victim becomes part of the evidence, an exhibit, on display for police, pathologists, forensic specialists, lawyers, and, eventually, jurors. Number it. Photograph it. Take samples. Tag the toe.” (21). First, inherent in Dr. Brennan’s description is a violation of privacy, a reality the anthropologist understands when she says that “[v]iolent death allows no privacy. It plunders one’s dignity as surely as it has taken one’s life” (21). The naked body becomes an object of study and becomes disassociated with the life that it once

inhabited. This is also evident in the way body parts become the property of the LML. Second, the body is touched, manipulated, taken apart, dissected, and more, again without the permission of the individual. This bears resemblance to Fortier’s violent treatment of the body. This treatment also resembles the often invasive process victims undergo when they voice sexual assault accusations and testify against perpetrators, which is frequently described as a second violation, as victims reexperience and relive the “private” trauma for “public” institutions, such as law enforcement agencies and legal establishments.<sup>6</sup> Third, Alcott’s description of her own experience of violation, where her offender took her “supine, comatose body, undress[ed] it and position[ed] it” (7), and where she had been incapable of articulating her will, is unnervingly similar to what Dr. Brennan describes. Fourth, the body becomes appropriated by governmental institutions, which determine in what manner it can be (ab)used. The body becomes impersonal, or a way for the criminal justice system to solve and close cases, which resembles the management of sexual assault cases that Alcott describes as prioritizing and protecting institutions rather than victims (Alcott 9). The will and wants of the victims become secondary to the evidence that the body can supply.

Also, the institution decides to whom the body is visible and available. In the novel, the participants are predominantly male, and, since the novel deals with sexual, physical, and verbal violence against women perpetrated by men, this gestures towards gender differences in terms of privilege and power dynamics. Finally, given that Dr. Brennan reads, or if we maintain the metaphor of the body speaking, listens, to the story of the crime on the body, she involuntarily participates in this violation just as Mandel

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<sup>5</sup> See Alcott’s *Rape and Resistance* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> See Alcott 28-9.



states that “[r]eading about violence is an (innocent) form of witnessing, and enjoying, violence—albeit in a shuddering, shameful and guilt-ridden way” (qtd. in Scaggs 86). This is also the case for readers who witness, experience, and participate in her examination of the body and become spectators and bystanders. Nonetheless, Dr. Brennan’s conflicted feelings, whether these are shame, guilt, or disgust, distinguish her from Fortier, who feels no remorse about his behaviour.

Dr. Brennan’s profession allows her to critique the procedures she practices and expose the often inadequate responses to violence against women. Given the close similarities between Dr. Brennan and Reichs, the latter who, Carme Farre-Vidal explains, “draws heavily from her first-hand experiences over the autopsy table” (55), it can be assumed that the protagonist and author’s views align, and what is more, function to provide a social commentary grounded in realism.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Brennan criticizes the transgressive nature of the criminal justice system and models more empathetic work ethics. She understands some of the problematic elements of her work: “While I am an active participant, I can never accept the impersonality of the system. It is like looting on the most personal level” (Reichs 21). Evidently, the forensic anthropologist is aware that the procedures violate the individual’s rights and privacy, but she deems such procedures necessary to obtain justice. Also, Dr. Brennan’s use of the word “impersonality” denotes that she acknowledges that professional detachment is necessary to complete such gruesome work. She also, however, recognizes the dangers of becoming desensitized to violence. She relates: “I saw violent death every day. [...] And sometimes I felt nothing. Professional detachment. Clinical disinterest. I saw death too often, too close, and I feared I was

losing a sense of its meaning” (411-2). Death becomes commonplace, and violence becomes normalized. In effect, for the detectives of the QPP, violence against women is routine (155). Dealing with death regularly, it may be psychologically healthier for those who witness the constant barrage of violent death to consider corpses as cases rather than human beings. However, this mental process dehumanizes bodies. Dr. Brennan, as opposed to her colleagues, understands from experience the emotional weight of her occupation and refuses to disassociate from her emotions because she recognizes that her strength lies in her ability to empathize with victims.

In *Déjà Dead*, Dr. Brennan becomes emotionally involved in the murder investigations, which she deems deeply “personal” (412). Her concern for victims and their families and her personal commitment to her professional responsibilities is the central reason the QPP solves the case. During the investigation, she reconnects with her emotions and feels “[e]mpathy to the point of pain” (228), embracing her distressing response to their deaths because they are, she explains, “a lifeline to [her] feelings” and her “humanity” (412). In this way, her examinations of the body become less mechanical, automatic, and remote and more humane. Above all, Dr. Brennan is painstakingly cognizant that the bodies represent individuals. When working on Gagnon’s unidentified body, she imagines “the last time the victim had combed it” and wonders “if she’d been pleased, frustrated, indifferent” (19), and when recalling Trottier’s autopsy, she remembers “[w]ith a stab of pain” “that her toenails were painted a soft pink” (48). As Horsley and Horsley explain, such a novel produces “a perspective nearer to that of the victim,” which allows readers “to listen to the voices of the dead” (3). The emotionally charged narrative recounted through a first-person

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<sup>7</sup> See pages 54 and 5 of Farre-Vidal for an in-depth comparison between Dr. Brennan and Reichs.

perspective, Farre-Vidal maintains, also allows readers to identify with Dr. Brennan and feel, as she does, empathetic towards victims (49). Although harrowing, these imaginings nourish her desire for justice and help fuel her investigation of the murders.

In this manner, Dr. Brennan alters her colleagues' response to the Fortier murders through her empathy, reminding them that the female victims are individuals, and that women's lives are in danger. At first, certain detectives fail to empathize with victims and demonstrate a lack of care and concern. She critiques their apathy. For example, she observes investigator Luc Claudel's response to Gagnon's identified corpse: "He frowned, but I could see the excitement collecting in his eyes. He had a victim. Now he could begin the investigation. I wondered if he felt anything for the dead woman or if it was all an exercise to him" (42). For Claudel, the investigation becomes a game. He is preoccupied with solving the case, but not for Gagnon or her family, according to Dr. Brennan. As the novel progresses, the forensic anthropologist's engrossment impresses upon her colleagues the significance of apprehending Fortier. She reminds them that Fortier, while free, is a danger to society (339). Her colleagues become, like her, vehement to find the killer of women. Dr. Brennan also ensures her colleagues and professional acquaintances collaborate and cooperate effectively. She is the central figure that consolidates various specialists from different departments, such as her colleagues at the LML, the investigators in the QPP, Dobzhansky at Quantico, the psychiatrist Dr. Laperrière, and Dr. Calvert, among others. It is her leadership that unites a team of professionals that join forces to finally apprehend Fortier. Dr. Brennan transforms group dynamics and changes the atmosphere of the criminal justice system,

perhaps temporarily, to position the victims at the centre of the crime and consequently obtain justice, which helps atone for the second violation she unintentionally commits.<sup>8</sup>

Reichs positions Dr. Brennan as the female force that allows victims to tell their stories, albeit in a mediated form, through her unique combination of mental and emotional skills. Without her specialized skills and knowledge, the victims would have died in silence, as Fortier would have hoped, which is possibly worse than the second violation she commits. As a forensic anthropologist, Dr. Brennan possesses qualifications acquired through extensive education and experience. These allow her to uncover details to link the murders together and to Fortier. In the novel, the body, and particularly the skeleton, is a text that only she can read. Dr. Brennan's profession becomes her art, which, like Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective Sherlock Holmes, arises from "long hours of study and practice" (Wilste 11) and relies on science. Like Holmes, Dr. Brennan follows the scientific method. She makes a hypothesis and then seeks to prove it with evidence. Unlike Holmes, Dr. Brennan is more than a "reasoning and observing machine" (Doyle, "Scandal in Bohemia" 117). Not only does she theorize before obtaining data, which Holmes dissuades (119), but she also relies heavily upon intuition, compared to the mechanical Holmes. Dr. Brennan experiences "forebodings" (30), "subliminal itch[es]" (342), "cognitive itch[es]" (459), "nagging[s]" (479), and "pre-idea sensation[s]" (491), all of which guide her investigation. She knows *and* feels that the murders are connected. Her intuitive feelings demonstrate that knowledge is not only found in the mind but also in the body. Feelings, which are felt in the body, become a strength that complements her

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<sup>8</sup> Alcoff similarly argues that the "voices of victims" "need to remain at the center of the fight for cultural change" (2).

intellectual abilities, both of which enable Dr. Brennan to solve the murders, just as Anuškauskaitė explains that “the ability to empathise and disengage at will provides the investigator with an additional advantage over the criminal” (143). Similarly, Sabine Vanacker claims that feminist crime novels privilege women’s voices “by positing a ‘subjective, involved, empathetic kind of knowing’” (qtd. in Horsley and Horsley 10). In effect, her extrasensory perceptions are associated with her ability to empathize with the victims. Dr. Brennan ensures victims obtain justice, even though this requires transgressive behaviour.

Dr. Brennan empathizes with the female victims because she understands the threat of being a woman since she experiences various forms of physical and verbal violence throughout the novel, while her male colleagues experience relative safety. For instance, a man attacks her at the *Fête Nationale* and insults her based on her gender (Reichs 134-5); Tanguay or “Dummy Man” makes countless calls to her home; Fortier places a head in her backyard (304), knocks her unconscious (186), and attempts to murder her (502-10). Evidently, she is not immunized from danger.<sup>9</sup> None of the other investigators are ever in danger, nor do they receive “gender specific” (134) insults like Dr. Brennan. The world of the novel—which is, as previously mentioned, grounded in reality—is one where women are constantly threatened by men.<sup>10</sup> The sex worker Jewel’s answer to Dr. Brennan, when the latter asks if her friend Gabby is in danger, perfectly encapsulates this idea: she responds, “She female, chère?” (243). Nevertheless, Dr. Brennan transforms this implied vulnerability into a strength. She understands, perhaps more than other characters, the QPP’s obligation to arrest Fortier, and for this reason, she willingly endangers her own safety. While Dr.

Brennan commits unintentional harm to victims’ bodies, she is also willing to jeopardize her own body, and life, to uncover the truth, such as when she stalks Dummy Man, pursues St-Jacques, and investigates an “X” on St-Jacques’s map of the city. However, she cannot produce a feeling of safety for women, given that the novel creates the impression that there is an endless stream of predators to apprehend.

While Dr. Brennan receives innumerable threats, she also threatens the closed community of the QPP, a patriarchal institution, which resembles, in some manner, the transgressions she commits on un-consenting bodies. The novel portrays the forensic anthropologist as a necessary intrusion into the predominantly male workforce. As an outsider, the detectives make her feel unwelcome. Claudel tries to “cut her out of the loop” (65) and tells her to “[s]tick to what [she] do[es] and let [them] catch the killers” (158), and investigator Andrew Ryan, likewise, tells her “this is my case” (339), indicating that she has overstepped her boundaries. Claudel and Ryan are, at first, possessive and uncollaborative. Claudel even files an official complaint against Dr. Brennan (272). More problematic is their condescension. They believe she is incompetent and unprofessional. Claudel orders Dr. Brennan not to touch anything at the crime scene (123), refuses to take her suggestions seriously, and tells her she is overreacting (44) and overreaching (272). The detectives require evidence of her claims before accepting her professional opinions, all of which no other detective must experience. Dr. Brennan must constantly create a space for herself in the investigation and prove herself worthy as a valuable team member. She also iterates that her contributions—beyond her jurisdiction of the space of the body (198)—are valuable, which is the reason

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<sup>9</sup> In thrillers, Todorov states, detectives are not immunized against danger (231).

<sup>10</sup> The novel discusses the binary gender system in terms of men and women. I recognize that gender exists on a spectrum.

she goes beyond her specific duties. Her intrusion becomes inclusion, as Dr. Brennan ultimately gains credibility, but only through their approval, which demonstrates that while she transforms the internal dynamics, it remains impossible to change the larger patriarchal structures that determine in what manner power is attributed. This lack of credibility causes real damage. The detective's lack of faith in Dr. Brennan, and similarly, her lack of faith in herself, is the reason the forensic anthropologist chooses to protect her reputation over her friend Gabby (415). Dr. Brennan rejects her instinctive feelings because of the threatening gaze of her colleagues. Their lack of credibility resembles instances where victims of sexual assault are not trusted, much as Alcoff explains that "[w]hen victims speak out publicly, they put themselves at risk of being discredited, blamed, threatened, and physically harmed" (29). Reichs exposes the fact that some voices have credibility, while others are not trusted.

W.H. Auden states that the traditional "interest in the thriller is the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil" (406). *Déjà Dead* is no exception. However, delineating between the forces of good and evil becomes complex, as the criminal justice system and the criminal utilize comparable methods that transgress the private space of the female body. While Dr. Brennan actively participates within the justice system as forensic investigator, she resists the patriarchal institution's dominant ideology by addressing both ethical and epistemological questions, given that she seeks truth and justice.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Segal writes that detective fiction is "epistemological" rather than "ethical" (168).

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# The Imaginary in "The Shrouded Woman": A Liminal Transgressive Space between the Symbolic and Death

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Aurora Kiser

## Abstract

Labeled at once as a conformist woman writer and feminist, María Luisa Bombal (1910-1980), the Chilean author, like her protagonists, represents an ambiguous character. As a challenge to definite categorization neither in the feminine field nor in the feminist realm, the author's conflicting messages are misleading in her writing and life. Her most famous novel, "The Shrouded Woman" (1980), has been hailed as a prototype of feminine writing. However, I propose that rereading this text from a different point of view highlights a postmodern feminist statement, although very subversive, disguised in the garb of a written message that fits in with the conformity of the Chilean bourgeois world that surrounds the author. Focusing specifically on the theory of Belgian feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, I show how the central protagonist, Ana María, exalts female power. Introduced to the reader as a dead protagonist lying in her final resting pose, she remains conscious unbeknown to the mourners attending the wake. She uses this liminal space between the Symbolic and Death as a transgressive plane. Through a recollective analysis of various relationships with the opposite sex, she denounces and subverts the abuses of the patriarchal discourse that silenced her voice.

Luce Irigaray, the Belgian feminist philosopher, uses her theoretical masterpiece, "This Sex Which Is Not One," to expose how female discourse, sexuality, and Imaginary have been silenced and oppressed (23). According to Irigaray, the woman is the victim of a specular masculine economy that denies her a position of speaking subject because she does not possess a phallus. Thus, it considers a woman an inferior being, and its phallogocentric thinking defines her and categorizes her as an object (24). She represents the negative, the man who could not be because he did not get a male organ. As an object, her function and

mission are defined according to masculine parameters (32). Irigaray calls this male perspective the "speculum." It refers to a gynecological instrument, suggesting the "objectification" of women as passive, penetrable, and sexually repressed beings, victims of a scopophilic economy. From the moment a woman leaves the Imaginary realm and enters the realm of the Symbolic, governed by "Le Nom du Père," she loses her possibility of significance (61). Both her female voice and her sex do not exist. However, she possesses a specifically feminine linguistic style, "le Parler femme," very different from male speech and related

to her body and sexuality. Irigaray represents this symbiotic relationship between the body and the language with the two vaginal lips, which enunciate the lost feminine Imaginary, the unconscious, instead of the cultural Symbolic (69).

Irigaray further points to the fact that since the limiting dimensions of specular linguistics confine a woman's speech, she can only use the tools of the phallogocentric system to express herself. However, she can choose to subvert the male speech with parody, which will allow her to interrupt it. As a negative mirror of the man, the woman can exaggerate the representation of herself according to phallic definition. However, to be successful, she has to fully and consciously assume her mirror roles - product, reproductive vessel, object of pleasure for men, mother - in addition to the patriarchal definition of her essence - passive, weak, inferior, and sacrificed. What Diana Fuss has called an "essentialist strategy" is what Irigaray proposes for women to rediscover their lost desire outside of the masculine definition and to affirm their difference within their condition of otherness as "Others" (Fuss 70). Only in this way can they turn the act of subordination into affirmation; that is, they can use the system itself to allow the female voice to be heard through the breaks that naturally exist within the hegemonic linguistic system of phallic power.

As an illustration of such strategy, this paper focuses on the novel "The Shrouded Woman" (*La amortajada*), written by the Chilean María Luisa Bombal in 1938. Investigating the focus on the feminine essence in this ultra-sentimental and romantic novel shows how it becomes the essentialist strategy necessary to weaken the phallogocentric discourse proposed by Irigaray.

In the story, the central character, Ana María, witnesses her own funeral and sees

her life in retrospect before experiencing an actual death depicted as an orgasmic fusion with nature and the cosmos. Although the author denies an interest in feminism and her concept of femininity coincides with the phallic definition of woman, it is evident that "*le parler femme*" and feminine sexuality, reflected in the protagonist's unconscious, express the opposite. In reality, they act as a tool for subversion and denunciation of the patriarchal machinery designed to ensure that women remain silenced, utterly dependent on men.

The first section analysis fully supports the novel's feminine essentialist definition from a phallogocentric perspective. However, in the second section, strategic essentialism stands out from a conscientious reading of the same elements that made the text a feminine narrative. As a result, it demonstrates how this essentialism serves as a tool of subversion concerning feminine pleasure and feminine language. Its function is to disturb the patriarchal discourse. The last part of the essay explores how the novel also serves as a documentary to denounce the oppressive practices of patriarchy. It calls attention to the destructive messages that men send to women who in turn internalize them as unshakable beliefs.

On first reading, the novel "The Shrouded Woman" can probably be categorized as feminine writing of a very conventional type. Its non-transgressive character seems to reflect the author's personal conviction that the destiny of women depends on their ability to become the object of man's desire. Therefore, the romantic and existential elements at the thematic level and the structural variations in the novel place the central protagonist as the antithesis of the prototype of feminist women. For example, the first heroine's love affair with Ricardo ends with "the abrupt abandonment of her lover" (54). This event causes a tragic

abortion induced by the ingestion of some medicinal herbs, "the river of blood in which that flesh of yours mixed with mine was disintegrated" (53) and a suicide attempt, "then abruptly, I shot against a tree" (46). Thus, unrequited love, tragedy, and death, critical themes of romantic fictions stand out in the "angst" of existence experienced by the female characters and their dependence on the love of a man as their only reason for being. Another example of unattainable love in the life of the main character centers on her marital union. At the beginning of her marriage, her husband Antonio is very much in love with her. However, she rejects him initially because she has married him to forget Ricardo, her lover who has abandoned her. Unfortunately, when she realizes that she loves her husband very much, it is too late because he has stopped loving her and this fact becomes the greatest tragedy of her life. Her anxious persistent questioning, "Why, why must the nature of woman be such that a man always has to be the axis of their life?" (74) betrays her belief in the universal destiny of women as condemned to being dependent objects of men,

However, the romantic element that most defines the protagonist as a feminine essence is found in her affinity with nature, which is described in sensual and lyrical prose that reveals her intimate emotions,

" She grew up and began to float a narrow stream of feathers. She was a flock of white owls. They were flying. Its flight was soft and heavy, silent as night. And that was so harmonious that she, suddenly, she burst into tears" (44). The story poetic stance reaffirms the archetype of the Nature woman who lives in an intimate, intuitive world and who has a symbiotic link with the earth, for she shares with it a biological life-giving power.

Similarly, the existential element in the novel completes the profile of a woman as a self-sacrificing, submissive being, dependent

on man for her happiness. For example, the protagonist's anguish over her death disappears when she realizes that the men who made her suffer, felt, or still feel a love for her. Consequently, when she learns that despite the years and the distance, she had always had a place in the heart of her beloved Ricardo, she experiences incredible tranquility. In the same manner, when she remembers her marital existence, estranged from her husband, she experiences the painful loneliness suffered throughout her married life. In the end, she realizes that heartbreak and deception, hallmarks of her failed marriage, had changed her and molded her into a mean and frustrated person. Thus, the existential themes of frustration, loneliness, and lack of communication highlighted in the story emphasize the concept that women's spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being is primarily determined in terms of the male figure.

Finally, the constant retrospective between the past and the present, punctuated by the poetic refrains

"-Come on, come on. -Where to? -Beyond." or "While the day burns hours, minutes, seconds" (78) that brings the reader from one spatial dimension to another, adds to the idea of the fragile and passive essence of the woman as a being who exists without acting in the fantastic universe of her Imaginary. In the same manner, the slow construction of the protagonist's personality and life reinforces the image of a woman as an object because she is created based on the male characters' gaze. As the men she knew appear during the wake, the protagonist's personality is revealed little by little through the prisms that emerge from the protagonist's mind according to the retrospective evaluation of her past relationships with these male companions. This slow unveiling highlights her lack of self-identification and her dependence on the gaze ("the Gaze") as a

patriarchal system of self-worth. Ultimately, the novel's romantic and existential features accentuate the protagonist's hyper-feminine side as well as her lack of agency. They divulge her conviction on a conscious level - and by extension, that of the author - that there is a feminine essence making that a woman focus only on man as vital motivation. In this sense, reading the novel will give the reader a vision of Ana María as a model of a passive and selfless woman, entirely subject to men, and thus situated at the extreme of the female models exposed by feminists. Likewise, this supports the position of Barbara Ichiishi, who argues that *La Shrouded* represents the universal tragedy of the woman who cannot achieve what she wants in this world and that she is condemned to live indirectly through men. Therefore, for oppressed women, captives of the patriarchal system, death represents the only possible liberation.

However, the present analysis proposes that this novel can be read entirely differently, altering the feminine concept and emphasizing the radical difference of the "Other." In this context, Luce Irigaray's theory of language and female sexuality can be applied as a tool to turn the Bombalian narrative into a feminist tactic of strategic essentialism, which defines women as specific and valuable beings imbued with a powerful and unique difference. As Lucía Guerra mentions, María Luisa Bombal had already transgressed the patriarchal conventions of her time by labeling herself a writer and an artist (87). In her analysis of "*La última niebla*" by the same author, Guerra investigates how Bombal's descriptions of women's desire in erotic and intimate terms directly subvert the concept of women as incapable of experiencing autoeroticism and /or being motivated by lustful instincts. Critics remind us that the only allusions to women's sexuality in

nineteenth-century Latin American novels were about the procreative dimension of their morphology. Guerra also describes Bombal's deviation from this phallogentric female conception in a dual and very subtle way when she mentions the following author's strategy in the novel: "She intertwines and juxtaposes the Imaginary (as aseismic fluctuation) and the Symbolic (as a convention that fixes). Her heroine's sexuality transgresses the feminine sentimental discourse and by doing so she highlights the erased space of female sexuality." (59) Indeed, it can be argued that in the novel, the allusion to the nature of female desire is more direct and recalls the Irigarayan concept of female sexuality. Irigaray evokes the symbolism of the morphology of the vaginal lips that continually touch themselves to inform women of their forgotten ability for autoeroticism and their "jouissance," which allow them to enjoy a pleasure that is both polymorphic and diffuse as well as mystical without the intervention of a man (104). Although the woman is divisible and cannot be "One", she is much more than a singular organ and can experiment with pleasure in a multidimensional way. On the other hand, unlike a man, a woman's sexual desire is not satisfied by possession but rather delights in proximity. It is this specificity and feminine difference in achieving pleasure that is visible in the description of Ana María's joy when she is very close to Ricardo's body, "I did not know how he could awaken so much tenderness in me, or why it was so sweet the warm contact of his skin" (12). Likewise, her sexual behavior with her lover Ricardo, whom she adored, "You found me cold because you never got me to share your frenzy since the smell of dark wild carnation of your kiss had already filled me up" (18) reveals her ability to enjoy pleasure and her

sense of complete satisfaction without the need for intercourse.

Similarly, Ana María's understanding of the objectification of her sexuality as an instrument of male pleasure can be guessed in her attempt to deny her own desire and to hide it in the presence of her husband. She does not want to experience any pleasure born from her intimate union with him, "she no longer fought only against the caresses but against the trembling that night after night they made inexorably sprout, in her flesh" (62). Rejecting to be "the obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies and to experience, by proxy, a pleasure that is above all the masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own" (Irigaray 25), she refuses to participate in the sexual act and to lower herself to the rank of a mere prostitute.

Although Irigaray never describes what exactly "*le parler femme*" consists of, she compares it to the biology of female sexuality and its fluid nature move in constant flux in the form of infinite exchange. For this reason, she defines it using descriptors such as "continuous, compressible, expandable, viscous, diffusive" (Fuss 59). According to Irigaray, like women's pleasure, the meaning of female discourse is diffuse and diversified, fragmented, and formed by many layers of meanings. Furthermore, since the sexuality of the woman is completed in the proximity and not in the possession like that of the man, her speech is never determined or fixed, nor does it coincide precisely with the meaning of the enunciated word. Only the meaning and the word come very closely together, as the two adjoining lips touch. Thus, "when she says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means" (Irigaray 29).

In the novel, apart from romantic existentialism that has been mentioned above, there is a surrealist language that imbues the narrative that could be implied to mean "*Le Parler Femme*." It is identified

with the flow of consciousness, the dream images, and the premonitory dreams that emerge from the protagonist's unconscious. The narrative is in a constant flux that causes the reader to go back and forth, traversing a fluid temporal dimension of space and memory that is both ambiguous and fuzzy. This Irigarayan language gives an ethereal quality to the interior monologue of the shrouded woman and gives her intuitive and magical powers. In life as in death, she seems capable of communicating with the divine force of nature. For example, she seems as if magically guided by a storm when searching desperately for her lover who has fled: "An unknown force was drawing my steps from the horizon, "Come, come, come, it seemed to scream at me, frantic, the storm"" (26). Her feminine intuition is such an accomplice of nature that the news of her lover's return reaches her unconscious through lightning and the sound of thunder. This affinity with nature fulfills its paroxysm in death. The protagonist, Ana Maria, has reviewed her life and finally received answers to the enigmas that had plagued her throughout her life. Her last breath is described as an orgasmic cosmic symbiosis with nature. She feels an infinity of roots sink and spread in the earth like a powerful web through which the constant palpitation of the universe rose trembling up to her, "She now wished but to remain crucified to the earth, enjoying in her flesh the coming and going of distant, very distant tides ... (259)." She can now abandon herself to the dream of death eternally melded to the cosmos.

This final transcendental vision evokes the feminine archetype of Mother Nature and confirms women's essentialism and reproductive destiny. Paradoxically, it gives her a divine aura, as if she were the ontology of all things and beings, even that of men. The image of his orgasmic fusion with nature is an affirmation of the fundamental power



that replicates the sexual union that, according to Irigaray, since "the beginning of civilization man has used, and penetrated woman in an attempt of appropriating in vain the mystery of his own conception in the maternal womb" (170). In this final paroxysmal moment of the novel, Bombal makes us understand that the shrouded woman, who represents the feminine archetype for all women, unlike men, has managed to revive her own conception, "reviving a very old relationship - intrauterine, but also prehistoric to the maternal" (Irigaray 25). Furthermore, she does it while she experiences the mystical "jouissance", this secret dimension of orgasmic pleasure that Lacan suspected women possess (134). This supplementary ability confirms that she is not confined within the parameters of phallic pleasure, as man is, and thus subverts the idea that eroticism and female pleasure do not exist outside the domain of procreation.

Besides encouraging women to affirm their difference and discover who they are outside of patriarchal cultural definitions, Irigaray cautions: "for woman to reach the place where she takes pleasure as woman, a long detour by way of the analysis of the various systems of oppression brought to bear upon her is assuredly "necessary" (31). Lorna Williams in her article, "Marriage and Its Constraints in the Fiction of María Luisa Bombal", does exactly this when she discloses how the social conventions conceived by the patriarchal machinery have managed to persuade women that they are naturally unequal to men and that their valuation of themselves can only be fulfilled as wives and mothers. In the same way, in the analysis, she investigates how the novel denounces other oppressive strategies that consist of disseminating destructive messages that women take as truth. For example, they have internalized the universal

message that all their value is founded in the sum of specific attributes that men have postulated as essential. That brings us back to Irigaray and the speculum. The woman as an object has been molded according to male expectations due to her status of commercial value exchanged between men. In Irigaray's words, women are "a commodity ... whose price will be established in terms of the standard of their work and need/desire, by subjects" (31). Obviously, men are the ones who mark them and determine their value in the sex trade. Thus, for centuries, the criterion determining what is attractive in a woman has been established and summarized in three attributes: beauty, passivity, and morality. In the novel, this very theme of male expectations of women regarding their attractiveness is pervasive. The female protagonists' despair becomes almost tangible because they fear not gathering all the necessary qualities to attract and captivate a man. As Irigaray points out, for example, the predominance of the visual in the man's psyche means that, within a specular economy, the woman must be primarily a beautiful object of contemplation (26). Consequently, the women characters have internalized the belief that beauty is an absolute necessity for a woman to be an object of desire.

This concern is evident in the novel in the descriptions of the women, always looking in the mirror, anxiously examining their face and body to make sure they meet the requirements formulated by the men. For example, María Griselda, Ana María's daughter-in-law, is so beautiful that all men who see her fall in love with her immediately. Her beauty poses a threat to other women. Thus, Silvia's husband, Ana María's son, stops loving his wife from the first moment he meets María Griselda. Desperate, Silvia chooses to commit suicide because she is not beautiful enough to recapture her husband's



interest. Even in death, beauty remains essential to Ana María. She has been subjected to men's gaze throughout her life and has to endure it till the end. "She delights in her new appearance perfected by the ingenuity of those who prepare the dead, "and suddenly she feels without a single wrinkle, pale and beautiful as never before and an immense joy invades her, that they can admire her like this " (7). Thus, female beauty stands out as a magnetic force that men cannot resist and that is absolutely necessary for women to become an object of male desire. From a male point of view, the beauty of the woman is probably the most important characteristic because it engenders desire and increases the value of the woman as a product. However, the novel reveals that there are other definitions and categories attributed to women to assess her potential value. Surely, here we are not talking about intellectual values, because the roles that women could only occupy reflect the reality of the Chilean gentry in the 20th century, when Bombal wrote her novel. The female characters neither work nor study; they are compared to saints (María Griselda), angels (Sofía) or sinners (Marta) and are confined within their roles as wives, mothers or prostitutes.

Apart from her physical beauty, the woman has to stay in a place determined by the conventions. For example, Ana María remembers in a disapproving way her brother Luis rejection of her best friend's affection because she was too passionate and assertive. In her place, he had chosen the security of Luz Margarita's complacent and servile love. As a result, Ana María's conclusion that women like Elena must suffer for their spirit of freedom and pay with loneliness and desertion (182) reinforces the status quo that women are better off following the patriarchal model.

In the novel Ana María's marriage symbolizes the barter that Irigaray denounces as another marker of oppression. It is the same as a contract, an arrangement on the father's part that ensures that his daughter's physical and moral attributes are appropriately compensated within a union that brings wealth to the whole family.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates how the shrouded woman's self-definition follows the norms imposed by the Symbolic, governed by the phallic order. It explains how and why Ana María agreed to be subjected to the gaze of men throughout her life. However, a closer look reveals to the reader that "She" in turn also looks at them, "they then leaned down to observe the cleanliness and transparency of that strip of pupil that death had not managed to blur. Respectfully amazed, they bowed, not knowing that "She" also was seeing them. Because she saw, she felt" (1). Thanks to the author's ingenuity and surrealism that gives the novel its magical dimension, the protagonist can speak from a space between the Symbolic and Death. This liminal space can be interpreted as the female unconscious or her Imaginary. From there, she subverts and denounces the world of oppression where women are marked by their fathers and husbands (Irigaray 31). In the story, the Irigarayan message, "woman will never be a woman solely in masculine terms, never be wholly and permanently annihilated in a masculine order" (Fuss, in Irigaray 61), comes to life. From the interior monologue made of the memories and retrospectives of the protagonist, the image of a mystical, multidimensional, and powerfully different being emerges; She has succeeded in defining herself on her own terms.

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# Shaping the “Now”: Feminist Reconfigurations of Linear Time in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*

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Jessica Banner

## Abstract

Chaucer’s character, Alisoun the Wife of Bath, is perhaps one of the most well-known figures in the medieval literary canon. Despite the diverse range of discourse on the Wife there remains ambiguity around *who* exactly is speaking and to what extent the *Prologue* and *Tale* –as carefully constructed and distinctly feminine acts of speech– had a lasting impact on medieval depictions of women in literature. My aim in this paper is not motivated by the desire to identify any singular, definitive conclusion on the motivations behind the Wife of Bath’s speech in both in her *Prologue* and *Tale*, but rather, I endeavor to use the multifaceted nature of her narrative as a springboard to investigate the potential that is contained within these speech acts for women during the Later Medieval period. This paper will argue that there are four temporalities at play within the Wife of Bath’s narrative – divine time, female time, the present or “now” time of the pilgrimage and the mythical time of her tale – that ultimately allow her to establish her own authorial voice. Within the figure of the Wife of Bath, Chaucer crafts a polyvalent character who is able to make use of four distinct temporal spaces, and in so doing she creates room for herself that exceeds her socially sanctioned role.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s character, the Wife of Bath<sup>12</sup>, is perhaps one of the most well-known and well-studied figures in the medieval literary canon. Despite the sheer amount of academic work devoted to the study of the Wife of Bath, what stands out particularly is that “there is probably less agreement about what [Chaucer] was doing in the case of the Wife of Bath than for any other part of his work”

(Rigby 133). The diverse range of discourse on the Wife prompts a number of complex questions around *who* exactly is speaking<sup>13</sup> and to what extent the *Prologue* and *Tale* –as a carefully constructed and distinctly feminine act of speech– had a lasting impact on medieval depictions of women in literature. What comes to the forefront amongst interpretations of the Wife of Bath is that in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer

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<sup>12</sup> In this paper, the Wife of Bath (her title) and Alisoun (her name) will be interchangeably used to refer to this character.

<sup>13</sup> Questions specifically arise around whether Alisoun is a mouthpiece for Chaucer’s own views or

if there is “a gap between the Wife’s discourse and Chaucer’s own voice, one which allows us to see the irony at work in her prolonged confession” (Rigby 135).

constructs a female character who is a “critical[ly] self-conscious,” nuanced subject, and provides “evidence of exemplary self-fashioning and agency” (Pitcher 1), which challenged medieval notions of femininity as one-dimensional.

John A. Pitcher expands upon Alisoun’s complex subjectivity to suggest that in the character of the Wife of Bath, “Chaucer accentuates the characteristic intertextuality of medieval poetry through the accumulation of heterogeneous contexts, a practice that works less to establish a unified perspective than to introduce divergences and discontinuities” (4). Within this “heterogeneous context” the Wife of Bath presents a pluralization of meaning that is demonstrative of careful and intentional rhetorical calculation (8). Furthermore, Pitcher suggests that Chaucer’s construction of the Wife, “puts critical pressure to bear on traditional social and theocentric identities, fashioning new ways of speaking about particularity and difference,” (1) which in turn constitutes an active challenge to the dominant, one-dimensional depiction of women in medieval literature.

Going back as far as the sixteenth-century readings of the Wife have been linked to a pre-feminist discourse<sup>14</sup> and more specifically one that brings into focus “the strength and lucidity of the feminine self in his work” (1) wherein the Wife of Bath’s power is formed through the performative nature of language as a form of “self-presentation” (3). Here, Chaucer’s rhetoric “is not merely an element of style or a technique of persuasion”, but rather allows

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<sup>14</sup> Highlighted by Scottish poet Gavin Douglas’s remark that Chaucer was ‘womannis frend’ (Pitcher 1).

for the cultivation of writing that “resists easy translation into the terms of a stable agenda” (3). In short, the multifaceted nature of her speech is what allows Alisoun to resonate as a complex female figure, and moreover one who resolutely resists definite classification in terms of traditional gender roles.

Before progressing any further, it should be made clear that my aim in this paper is not motivated by the desire to identify any singular, definitive conclusion on the motivations behind the Wife of Bath’s speech in both in her *Prologue* and *Tale*, but rather, I endeavour to use the multifaceted nature of her narrative (outlined by scholars like Pitcher and Rigby) as a springboard to investigate the potential that is contained within these speech acts for women during the Later Medieval period. This paper will argue that there are four temporalities at play within the Wife of Bath’s narrative—divine time, female time, the present or “now” time of the pilgrimage and the mythical time of her tale—that ultimately allow her to establish her own authorial voice. Within the figure of the Wife of Bath, Chaucer crafts a polyvalent character who is able to make use of four distinct temporal spaces, and in so doing she creates room for herself that exceeds her socially sanctioned role.

#### Women in the Later Medieval Period<sup>15</sup>

Before delving into an exploration of the Wife of Bath it is essential to provide a brief historical overview of the socially permitted roles for women during the Later Medieval period. During this period, conceptions of femininity were overwhelmingly associated with passivity

<sup>15</sup> This paper will make use of Maurice Keen’s conception of the ‘Later Medieval’ period, which Keen identifies as ranging from approximately 1200 to 1500.

and submission to dominant male figures. This association is underlined by Elizabeth Ann Robertson who explicitly links medieval femininity with a “passive materiality” that she suggests was “promulgated by Aristotle and developed in relationship to commentaries on Eve’s secondary creation in Genesis” (507). Robertson explains that “assumptions about women have their roots in the highly influential biomedical understanding of women articulated by Aristotle” (508), specifically stemming from his *De Generatione Animalium* and *Historia Animalium* wherein he explains that “the female always provides the material, the male that which fashions it, for this is the power that we say they each possess, and this is what it is for them to be male and female” (508).<sup>16</sup> Within this framework, women were seen as “an incomplete version of the male” (508), and as such were directly reliant on, and submissive to men. Robertson expands upon this, stating:

Patristic views of women affirmed these Aristotelian notions. Commentaries on Genesis emphasized the necessity of a hierarchy in which woman was subordinated to man by analogy to her association with the body and Adam’s with the head [...] Women were seen furthermore as daughters of Eve and therefore guilty of the fall of mankind. (508-509)

In Robertson’s reading, not only were women “incomplete,” but moreover they were –

through their relation to Eve– understood to be inherently sinful. In hopes of limiting the potential dangers of this sinful femininity, “acceptable” feminine virtue was carefully cultivated and could be achieved only through three socially sanctioned positions as either a virgin, wife or widow. Expanding upon Robertson’s assertion that women, as descendants of Eve, were linked both to the material body and Eve’s sin, Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl propose that as descendants of Eve “woman had tempted man, and temptation is the responsibility of the tempter, not the innocent who gives into seduction, women were considered bodily, carnal, and dangerous” (3). As the ‘guilty party’, women could only hope to redeem themselves through “sufficient piety” (3), which in turn led to the legal, social and spiritual subjugation.<sup>17</sup> In short, the subordination of women was deeply engrained into the fabric of late medieval English society.

Despite the staggering imbalance between male and female agency in medieval society, Sandy Bardsley adds important nuance to this dichotomy in her examination of medieval gender roles. Bardsley asserts that despite socially mandated subjugation, “most women exercised some degree of power in the Middle Ages” (193). Expanding upon her assertion Bardsley differentiates between power and agency, explaining that “Power suggests the ability to effect a change, to get someone to do something that they would not otherwise do”, whereas

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<sup>16</sup> Here Robertson draws on Jonathan Barnes’ translation of lines 20-43 in Aristotle’s *De Generatione Animalium* (Generation of Animals).

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Ward speaks to the ‘second-rate’ status of women in the Later Medieval period, highlighting the “growing emphasis on primogeniture and agnatic

lineage (or patrilineage)”, which “restricted women’s rights of inheritance” (5). Furthermore, female ‘vices’ were frequently evoked by preachers, writers and poets developing a cultural narrative around dangerous femininity.

“authority, defined as ‘recognized and legitimized power,’ was very seldom extended to women” (193). Returning to Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* this distinction becomes critically important, as Bardsley highlights that despite systematic oppression, individual women had the ability to influence their immediate social environment, primarily through interpersonal relationships with their husbands, children or neighbors. Ultimately, these scholars emphasize how women worked within the system of agency in order to establish power through small acts of resistance, and above all had the potential to push back against the patriarchal system that sought to confine them within the passive (socially sanctioned) roles of wives, virgins or widows.

### *Contemporal Time*

Building upon this brief historical background of women in the Later Medieval period, this paper will now move into an exploration of time and female engagements with temporal spaces. My primary objective in this section is to construct a notion of time. Once this foundation has been established, I aim to illustrate the malleability of linear (dominant) temporality, wherein women can make use of flexible openings in linear time and space to resist social subjugation and potentially push back against patriarchal domination.

The first step in exploring the potential resistive capacities of time is to have some idea of exactly what time is, which is admittedly no small task. Dinshaw highlights one of the primary issues with conceptualizing time, succinctly stating, “The problem with ‘now’ is that it’s ... *now*. Or it’s *now*. Or it’s right *now*. The denoted moment shifts, it slips, it is deferred, potentially infinitely, along an endless

timeline of moments” (2). Time is slippery, subjective and flexible, and this is precisely why it has the potential to foster resistance. Joel Burgess and Amy J. Elias also highlight the polyvocal nature of time. In their formulation, time can be understood as “an emerging structure of temporal *multiplicity* embedded in a history that has constructed the present as an experience of *simultaneity*” (12). What Dinshaw, Burgess and Elias all highlight in their conceptualizations of time is that it is inherently multiplicitous, and draws upon a series of diverging possibilities that weave in and out of the dominant linear temporal space.

If we accept the labyrinthine quality of time, the question then becomes: how can we possibly conceptualize these infinite diversions away from suppressive homogeneous (linear) time? Burgess and Elias propose that multiple temporalities can be understood as “contemporality[ies]” (12). Drawing on the work of Peter Osborne, they define contemporality as “a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but *of* times” (12). Wherein, “the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally* ‘present’ temporalities or ‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or *a disjunctive unity of present times*” (12-13). As such, each moment of the present time contains within an infinite number of simultaneous presents, which may include moments that have the potential to disrupt the dominant linear present. Of most importance here is that this plethora of “nows” opens the door for resistance through the malleability of these multiplicitous temporal presents, which in coming together and diverging have the potential to create ruptures in linear time.

Steven Connor illustrates the movement of contemporal time, underscoring how “[i]n contemporality, the

thread of one duration is pulled constantly through the loop formed by another, one temporality is strained through another's mesh; but the resulting knot can itself be retied" ( qtd. in Burgess and Elias 13). In this non-linear dance of time (coming in, out and through itself) what is of most interest, in relation to this paper, is the subversive potential that is created by this perpetual merging, slipping and collapsing of 'nows'. Burgess and Elias underscore the destabilizing potentiality of contemporality, proposing that "multiple times operat[e] subversively" (12) in so much as they open the door for alternative formations that may work against dominant power structures. Faced with the potential subversion of linear time—as a result of the contemporality—a new question arises in relation to Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*: how does the subject (in this case Alisoun) orient herself<sup>18</sup> within these multiplicitous nows? And moreover, how can this notion of contemporality be productively applied to medieval literature?

In her seminal text *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (2012) Dinshaw adeptly unites time theory and medieval literature, suggesting that the complex vascularity of time "prompts us to think and experience time differently" (4). Here Dinshaw draws our attention to the importance of 'feeling' time as a fundamental facet of a subject's orientation within it. This 'felt time' pulls together time and space in the way we perceive the world around us. Inasmuch as it is an individual subject's orientation that impacts their perception. Expanding on this

Sara Ahmed explains, "[t]he relation between action and space is hence crucial. It is not simply that we act in space; spatial relations between subjects and others are produced through actions, which makes some things available to be reached" (52). It becomes evident that subjects are able to orient themselves in time through the drawing together of time and space through perspective to create an individual place. From this place of orientation, it becomes possible to engage with the multiplicitous power of contemporality in order to unsettle patriarchal linear time.

Returning to medieval texts, Dinshaw underlines the powerful drawing together of temporal spaces, suggesting that "there were numerous powerful temporal systems operant in the Middle Ages: agrarian, genealogical, sacral, or biblical, and historical" (5-6). Medieval narratives frequently made use of these multiple temporalities, which created what Dinshaw understands as "asynchrony: different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment" (5). Moreover, in outlining the power of multiplicitous temporalities she explains that "Medieval narratives of people swept into another temporal world reveal with unusual clarity the constant pressure of other kinds of time on the ordinary, everyday image of one-way, sequential temporality" (6). In this framework, Dinshaw draws together desire, bodies and time in order to demonstrate the heterogeneous temporalities that resist classification (and suppression) by linear time, which she finds were powerfully active in medieval literature.

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<sup>18</sup> It is not that the potential does not exist for the male subject to distort linear temporality, and in fact I'm sure it does, but it lies outside the scope of this paper, which is principally interested in potential

diversions *away* from dominant masculine time, rather than the perpetuation of it.



### *The Wife of Bath*

Armed with both a brief historical overview of the Later Medieval period and the resistant potential of contemporal time, I will now address the ways in which Chaucer's Wife of Bath engages with four distinct temporalities in an attempt to resist containment within her the socially prescribed role as a woman.

At the most superficial level, the Wife of Bath appears to fit neatly into the aforementioned one-dimensional medieval depiction of excessive, bodily femininity. Through her classification as a wife, Alisoun is already at a disadvantage because she has already failed to conform to the ideal textual representation of medieval femininity as she is not a virgin. Pitcher in his analysis of the Wife of Bath ties her to "a particular class and profession distinctive to medieval Bath" (25). Pitcher further suggests that historicist criticism<sup>19</sup> about the *Tale* situates Alisoun in relation to multiple "Baths." creating "a certain contextual excess [that] threatens the referential stability of the name, its logic of place" (25). From the outset, her tale is "governed by a logic of displacement," which puts us in an "unsettling topography," (25) where "the name 'Bath' can be seen to connect Alisoun to a canonical site of sexual liaison...The term 'Bath' thus casts the Wife in incongruous roles on multiple stages, dispersing her identity across discontinuous signifying economies" (27). In this way, Pitcher situates the Wife in terms of a "contextual excess" that exists both outside of and within medieval linear (masculine) time and constitutes the formation of a place

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<sup>19</sup> Pitcher's analysis here draws heavily on the influential work done by Mary Carruthers in her article "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions" (1979).

<sup>20</sup> "Against" both in the sense of being opposed to the systems that govern linear time, but also in the sense

from which she can meld together the multiple temporal spaces that form her resistance within her *Prologue* and *Tale*.

The Wife of Bath makes use of both traditional (linear) and subversive (contemporal) time in her *Prologue* and *Tale*. This temporal blending is central to her contestation of patriarchal power structures, as she must work within existing power structures. It is not possible for any subject to exist completely outside linear time and live within society. As such, Alisoun must work *against*<sup>20</sup> late medieval social structures in order to interrupt the perpetuation of feminine confinement. The remainder of this paper will illustrate the four specific temporalities that the Wife of Bath makes use of –divine, female, present and mythical– in her opposition to patriarchal, linear time.

In the opening lines of her *Prologue* the Wife of Bath proclaims, "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, were right ynogh to me" (l. 1-2). Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor in their 2008 edition of *The Canterbury Tales* explicitly link the Wife's opening claim of experience without authority to "the writing of learned men, especially the Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Jerome, or ancient philosophers" (141). With the help of Boenig and Taylor's insightful notes two distinct kinds of experience are made evident: lived experience (associated with the Wife of Bath) on the one hand, and read/taught/learned experience (associated with masculine religious figures and thinkers) on the other. Looking at this association between religious

of being required to work alongside that same system. This dual notion of 'Against' was generated by a conversation with Julietta Singh following her talk, entitled "Unthinking Mastery" at the University of Toronto (2018).

figures and thinkers in the medieval period and experience, it becomes increasingly evident that this experience (and authority) drew heavily from the power of God.

In Dinshaw's exploration of temporality in medieval texts she asserts that God (and by extension the word of God) existed in what she outlines as a divine temporal space governed by "eternal time," (12-13) which exists simultaneously to the present time. In her illustration of this "eternal time" of God Dinshaw explains that "Human time is radically dissimilar to God's. As opposed to our own sublunary existence, God's eternal being is in a timeless now that is without before or after, past or future" (15). Moreover, this eternal time derives its authority from the combined power of God and the powerful entity that was the medieval Church, which in turn perpetually imbued the word of God and institutional religious learning with patriarchally sanctioned power.

Alisoun makes use of this divine time, aligning herself with the authority of God's word and male religious figures. Associating her speech (and by extension her actions) to the word of God, she proclaims, "God bad us forto wexe and multiplie" (28) before directly linking these words back to her own experience and interpretation: "That gentil text kan I understonde!" (29). By uniting the word of God with her own speech the Wife of Bath orients herself in relation to dominant linear time in an attempt to form her own distinct place. In her interpretation of the bible<sup>21</sup> Alisoun aligns herself and her

multiple marriages<sup>22</sup> to figure of King Solomon. She explains:

Lo here the wise kyng Daun Salamon.  
I trowe he hadded wyves mo than oon.  
As wolde God, it were leveful unto me  
To be refreshed half so ofte as he,  
Which yifte of God hadde he for alle hise  
wyvys. No man hath swich that in this  
world alyve is. (35-40)

By calling attention to the figure of King Solomon and his multiple wives Alisoun constructs a similarly legitimate position for herself, not only as a wife, but also as a reader and interpreter of religious knowledge. Here the Wife of Bath's manipulation of divine time creates a rupture in linear time, where instead of confining her within the socially sanctioned role of subordinate 'wife,' these two temporalities allow her to form her own subversive authority. In this moment, the patriarchally imbued power of divine time is used to subvert the masculine authority of linear time in the merging of these two temporalities.

There are a number of other moments in her *Prologue* where the Wife of Bath adeptly blends together divine and linear temporal spaces, however her interpretations of the bible (and invocation of divine time) do not always successfully support her. For example, after alluding to Jesus's rebuke of the Samaritan<sup>23</sup> Alisoun concedes, "[w] hat that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn," (20) admitting that in this instance she isn't clear on how to interpret Jesus's words. As such, Alisoun's speech (and correspondingly her contestation of patriarchal, linear time)

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<sup>21</sup> In this instance, she specifically refers to 1 Kings 11:33 (Boenig and Taylor 141).

<sup>22</sup> 'Housbandes at chirche dore I have had fyve' (4).

<sup>23</sup> Boenig and Taylor in their notes explain "Christ's rebuke of the Samaritan woman who had been

weeded five times is recounted in John 4:1-42" (141).

becomes increasingly complex. On the one hand, she is able to draw authority from the contemporal merging of divine and present times, but on the other hand she is limited by her own biblical interpretation, which creates considerable tension between her speech acts, knowledge, authority and femininity<sup>24</sup> as her *Prologue* continues. This tension underscores Alisoun's concerted effort to orient herself in time and create a place for herself, wherein she must work against her own internalization of linear (masculine) time.

It becomes increasingly clear that Alisoun's contestation of patriarchally defined gender roles requires more than just the evocation of divine time. As such, the second temporal space she engages with is 'female time.' Acting in accordance with Burgess and Elias' notion of contemporality, this new temporality weaves in and out of the present (or 'now') time coming in, out and through itself creating a space of contestation. Alisoun's construction of female time is not a single, unified temporal space, but is rather a space in contestation with itself.

The duality of Alisoun's female time is emphasized by the presence of both female empowerment and medieval antifeminist literary traditions in her *Prologue* and *Tale*. One of the most notable instances of the Wife of Bath's inclusion of 'traditional' medieval antifeminist sentiment is her discussion of her husband Jankyn's book of "Wikked Wyves" (685). Despite her criticism of these stories, wherein she asserts, "By God, if

women hadde written stories / As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, / They wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse" (693-696), Alisoun still affords considerable space to illustrating a number of examples of these

"wikked wyves."

Going into detail she recounts:

Womman was the los of al makynde [...]  
Of Hercules and of his Dianyre,  
That caused hym to sette himself afire.  
Nothyng fogat he the sorwe and wo  
That Socrates hadde with hise wyves two,  
How Zantippa caste pisse upon his heed.  
This sely man sat stille as he were deed.  
(720-730)

For the better part of two pages Alisoun continues to diligently list a number of these infamous 'wikked wyves' ranging from Phasifpha, to Clitermystra, to Lyvia. Lynne Dickson suggests that the inclusion of what she classifies as "a distinctly antifeminist" monologue fosters a space wherein "Chaucer asks his audience not only to rethink antifeminism but also to reconsider the sorts of dichotomized and essentialist notions of gender upon which discourses like antifeminism rely" (p. 71). For Dickson, it is Alisoun's ability to "respeak the patently patriarchal discourse of antifeminism" that dramatizes "the irresolvable antagonism between such constructions of the feminine and the female subject" (72). Concluding that in so doing Chaucer "opens a space for feminine discourse" (71). Above all, Dickson's remarks underscore the power contained within the Wife's complexly

<sup>24</sup> This tension is not only an integral part of the Wife's speech, but has also come to be a crucial facet of scholastic interpretation of this text. Boenig and Taylor highlight the considerable number of possible interpretations when translating the Wife of Bath's narrative. In one such instance they expand upon the linguistic duality of the *Prologue* in their notes,

suggesting that the phrase "beren hem on honed" (l. 226) has two possible meanings, either 'to deceive them' or 'to accuse them falsely' (145), underscoring the duality that forms a central facet of her speech— and by extension her contestation of patriarchal confinement.

layered speech. Alisoun goes into great detail regarding not only these ‘Wikked Wyves,’ but also her own marriages, taking charge of the typically masculine formation of time and space.<sup>25</sup> In her *Prologue*, she constructs a powerful narrative of her own where she is able to circumvent normative (patriarchal) expectations of passivity and submission for women in their roles as wives. The framework Alisoun creates fosters a distinctly feminine temporal space, which is formed by the cyclical (non-linear) movement of her life, where she has moved through five marriages drawing both individual and economic power from her husbands and forming herself as an active speaking subject.

Perhaps the most superficially evident temporality that exists within the Wife’s *Prologue* is the present or ‘now’ time of the pilgrimage. Chaucer adeptly creates a heterogeneous vocality within the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, where the voices of characters are overlaid on top of one another. In the *Prologue*, there are several instances where other characters interject during the Wife’s narrative. Each time another character interjects, whatever temporal space the Wife has constructed is interrupted, and she is rapidly pulled back into the present time of the pilgrimage. At three points during the Wife’s prologue she is interrupted by one of the male pilgrims, and in each instance these intrusive male voices jarringly shift the temporal register. The first instance occurs as the Wife evokes the authorial figure of an

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<sup>25</sup> Luce Irigaray asserts that the masculine subject is typically in charge of the formation of time and space, creating confinement through “circumscribed space and time” (Irigaray in Miller 240). Femininity for Irigaray is inextricably linked to the struggle for the female to find a place (in time and space) for herself. She explains, “if she is unable to constitute, within herself, the place that she is, she passes

apostle.<sup>26</sup> She proclaims: “[r] ight thus the apostel tolde it unto me / and bad oure husbondes for to love us weel / Al this sentence me liketh every deel” (160-163). Before she can continue her analysis, the Pardoner interjects:

‘Now, Dame,’ quod he, ‘by God and by Seint John,’  
 ‘Ye been a noble prechour in this cas!  
 I was aboute to wedde a wyf, allas!  
 Yet hadde I levere wedded no wyf to yeere!’  
 ‘Abyde,’ quod she, ‘my tale is nat bigonne.’ (164-169)

With this interjection, he attempts to commandeer her authorial space as storyteller, pulling the focus of the narrative back to himself. But, despite his efforts, Alisoun is able to push back against him with her assertion of “abyde” (169), which temporarily quiets him. The most jarring interruption comes at the end of her *Prologue* when the Somonour and the Frere (155) delay the beginning of her *Tale* by almost thirty lines. In this instance, the Wife herself is not able to reassert her own voice (and in turn begin her *Tale*), but instead the Host speaks up on her behalf and interrupts the two men. The Host states “Pees, and that anon... Lat the womman telle hire tale” (850-851), re-establishing order, and with his help she begins her *Tale*.

ceaselessly [in search of that place] in order to return to herself” (30). In these remarks Irigaray identifies the development of this sense of place as something internal, which is subsequently externally manifested.

<sup>26</sup> Boenig and Taylor suggest in their notes that this figure is St. Paul (p. 144).

The “now” or present time of the pilgrimage – with its cacophony of voices – is multifaceted, as each character potentially experiences the present time in their own way. In this way, this polyvocal “now” underlines the complexity of time whereas “the denoted moment shifts, it slips, it is deferred, potentially infinitely, along an endless timeline of moments” (Dinshaw 2), and this subjective, slippery and flexible “now” time creates punctures in the confining capacity of linear patriarchal time. Dickson conceptualizes these interruptions as a “kaleidoscopic layering of speakers” that in turn “presents a *mise en abîme* effect in which both speaker and audience are constructed as multiple, conflicted and indeterminate entities” (73). This kaleidoscopic layering of speakers draws our attention, as readers, to the present time of the pilgrimage. Furthermore, this layering, and the heterogeneous vocality that is created by it, offer a number of moments where the linear (masculine) time tries to restrict the Wife’s resistance, by speaking over her voice and forcing her back within the patriarchal present.

Turning now to the Wife’s *Tale* itself, and the last temporality used by the Wife of Bath. This final mythical temporality is clearly marked as a distinctly different time than the “now” or present time of the pilgrimage, which puts Alisoun at a distance from which she can more safely present her critique of traditional gender roles. Drawing attention to this shift her *Tale* begins:

In th’olde dayes of kyng Arthour,  
Of which that Britons speken greet  
honour,  
Al was this land fulfild of fairye.  
The Elf Queene with hir joly  
campaignye.

(857-860)

The story may take place on English soil, but the similarities between the mythical temporality and the present end with their shared geographical location. The England of Alisoun’s story is firmly oriented in a mythical past. Helping to situate us within this mythical realm Boenig and Taylor provide a note on the meaning of “Fairye”, suggesting that it “loosely refer to the supernatural beings from the mythical Otherworld known as elves or fairies” (157). Continuing they explain, “though they have no place in the dominant medieval Christian ideology, such beings maintained a hold on people’s imaginations through folktale and legend” (157). Not only is this time distanced from the present, but Boenig and Taylor draw attention to the differences between this mystical time and the masculine authority of divine time.

This mythical temporal space is constructed along distinctly feminine parameters and is marked by the powerful female figure of the Queen who asserts her own power through her relationship to the King. The Wife of Bath explains,

The queene and othere ladyes mo  
So longe preyden the kyng of grace,  
Til he has lyf hym graunted in the place  
And yaf hym to the queene al at hir wille  
To chese wheither she wolde hym save or  
spille. (894-898)

Although the Queen and her ladies are still under the dominion of King Arthur, they are able to obtain power in this moment, choosing to send the Knight off to discover “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (905). Ultimately, the Wife’s *Tale* comes to celebrate feminine power, coming

to a climax with the Knight's discovery that what women most desire is "sovereynettee," (1038) and concluding with the Knight agreeing to obey his new wife. What we are presented with by the Wife is not a radical departure from linear masculine time, or the corresponding patriarchal dominance of female bodies. Rather, her narrative highlights the subversion of patriarchal power by engaging with the multiplicity of times that exist alongside the dominant linear temporality. With her *Tale*, the Wife does not propose a radical overthrow of the dominant temporality, nor the patriarchal system that organizes it. Instead, by invoking this mythical temporal space she is able to present a subtle critique of the system from a safe distance. In so doing she brings together multiple temporal spaces where "the thread of one duration is pulled constantly through the loop formed by another," (Cooper in Burgess and Elias 13) which creates an enmeshed knot that puts pressure on the dominance of linear time.

Moreover, this entwinement of simultaneous present temporalities has subversive potential. Drawing heavily on the work of Julia Kristeva, Apter suggests that female subjects attempt to construct a future for themselves through an imagined past, which is out of sync with the dominant temporality. This past simultaneously exists alongside (and collides with) the present Apter suggests there is a "temporal violence" that "erupts" and "loosens periodicity's possessive perimeters" (16), ultimately opening up the potential for these women's time to extend into the future. From the distance of her *Tale's* mythical time, the Wife of Bath is able to capture the power of these mythical women to critique the suppressive present temporality and open up the potential

for an women's time that extends into the future.

To conclude, in considering the four temporalities (divine, present, female and mythical) utilized by the Wife of Bath in her *Prologue* and *Tale*, it becomes increasingly evident that she is able to draw considerable power from the "disjunctive unity of present times." Supported by the multiplicitous power of these times she successfully disrupts her traditionally confined place within patriarchal linear time. Certainly, she does circumvent traditional passive expectations for women as wives, but this being said, it seems her resistance is only temporary. I am not convinced that the interruption of linear, masculine time created in her narrative has the ability to continue after her *Prologue* and *Tale* come to an end, as the fragile balance of her contestation is highlighted by the instances where she is overwhelmed by dominating male interjections and limited by her own internalized anti-feminist rhetoric. Although her challenge to dominant social structures may be fleeting, it is clear that Chaucer has created a profoundly complex character who is at her core deeply conflicted, but nonetheless is able (through her actions) to fashion herself a place, drawing together time and space. Ultimately in creating this place for herself she opens the door for a potential future for literary representations of women that exceed beyond the limits of earlier medieval characterization of women as passive or sinful.

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# Sex, Blood and Violence in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*

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Crystelle Cotnoir-Thériault

## Abstract

This paper argues that John Cleland's eighteenth-century erotica novel, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, satirizes common male fantasies of its era. Indeed, Cleland's careful word choice highlights the ridiculous nature of sexual fantasies that portray women's excessive bleeding as a source of ultimate pleasure for men. Thus, much more than a series of sex scenes with a thin plot, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* can be seen as a historical exploration of sexual fantasies. As such, centuries after its first publication, the novel serves as a tool to help us reflect on depictions of male and female pleasure throughout time. We may draw the conclusion that, by fetishizing blood and violence in sexual acts without considering their most obvious consequences, male characters choose to ignore the cost of their fantasies: women's pain and discomfort. Yet Cleland also offers a glimpse of hope through his heroine's marriage to her first love and their more tender sexuality, presenting an alternative to fantasies of violence and blood.

In *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, John Cleland presents the sexual journey of Fanny Hill, evolving from the naivety of an innocent maiden to the confidence of an experienced prostitute. Written in an epistolary form from the point of view of Fanny herself, the novel recounts the sexual encounters experienced by Cleland's heroine, from her loss of virginity to her downfall into prostitution, and finally her reunion and subsequent marriage with her first love. Sexual relations are described vividly throughout the book; yet, Cleland purposely avoids obscene words, replacing them with clever euphemisms. The result is a novel in which each word has been carefully chosen, and language itself has a central role in our understanding of the underlying themes of Fanny Hill's story. In this essay, I will argue that the vocabulary used to describe sexual encounters in

*Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* allows a subtle criticism of the sexual fantasies of the eighteenth century. Indeed, by highlighting a seemingly intrinsic relationship between blood, sex, and violence, Cleland creates a social commentary about the patriarchal expectations that surround men and women engaged in sexual relations. In my analysis, I will explore the role of blood and violence in various experiences linked to sex in order to explore the critical elements hidden under the semblance of an erotic novel. Cleland's choice to present sex through the eyes of a woman is a deliberate one: it emphasizes the ridiculous undertone of numerous experiences, considering there would be no reason for a woman to describe sex in all its bloodiness, except to underline male fantasies. We may certainly wonder whether highlighting such fantasies serves

as an encouragement or a critique. I will thus argue that the narrative does not condone male fantasies, but rather interrogates their validity when they rely on the pain and blood of women.

In *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, the vocabulary of passion is notably similar to that of aggression, bringing a surprising violence to the portrayal of seduction and sex. Words such as “fierce”, “fervent”, or “violent” are used to describe sexual passion, while the male organ becomes a “weapon” and the female partner, a “victim”, until, ultimately, in more than one instance, intercourse leads to “an agony of bliss” (Cleland 31). This vocabulary announces a constant theme of bloody and violent sex in the novel. While blood is not mentioned in the above descriptions, bleeding is a recurring consequence of aggression and violence and, as we will see, it also becomes a recurring consequence of sex for Fanny and her companions. When he purposefully uses oxymorons such as “tender hostilities” (Cleland 32) or “sweet violence” (Cleland 33), Cleland guides the reader’s attention towards the difference between what sex should be (“tender” and “sweet”) and what sex often is in a world of male fantasy (“hostilities” or “violence”). The representation of such fantasies, while accurate, does not condone them, but, on the contrary, invites the readers to question them. It is up to men to decide whether the “engine of love assaults” (Cleland 40) is used for “love” or for “assaults”. Expecting both, as the novel implies, is unreasonable: the female partner, unlike her male counterpart, always ends up suffering or

bleeding. Men should not await “love” when what they offer is actually “assaults”; and women should not willingly comply to men’s fantasies when they are harmful. When Cleland depicts the inequalities of a patriarchal society in which men’s fantasies depend on women’s pain, he clearly seeks to criticize those tendencies.

Of course, blood is undoubtedly a natural part of sexual arousal for both sexes, which is also shown in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Fanny reminds us, in one scene, that the male organ is “ready to burst with the blood and spirits that swelled it to a bulk” (Cleland 163), and emphasizes on other occasions the role of blood in the presence of an erection. Moreover, Fanny’s own excitement is similarly linked to blood in Cleland’s novel. As Annamarie Jagose points out,

Once Fanny’s initiation into sexual knowledge “provok’d an itch of florid warm-spirited blood through every vein” (23), she is forever swept by “lambent fire” (11), “heated” (12), “warmly stir’d” (13), worked over by the “inflammable principle of pleasure” (22), “all on fire,” “inflamed” (25), “glowing with stimulating fires” (27), and “devour’d by flames that lick’d up all modesty and reserve” (151). (463)

This use of heat to describe sexual arousal is an interesting one, especially when coupled with the idea of blood, as evidenced in the first quotation. Since the warmth of blood is strongly connected to Fanny’s arousal in this scene, we can assume that the heat described in the other scenes comes from the same source. Consequently, blood emerges as an

indispensable part of sexual arousal for men as well as for women, which reinforces its natural connection to sexuality, even outside of the realm of male fantasy. Nevertheless, when Cleland consciously uses an excess of blood throughout the novel, it shows the *unnatural* disposition of male fantasies. Indeed, the frequency of bloody sexual scenes go beyond what should be expected in any woman's life.

As I have been arguing, the presence of blood is often implied rather than stated in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. From another angle, the novel seems to hint at the presence of blood during sex due to menstruation. This would not usually correspond to typical sexual fantasies; yet, there is a surprising association between menstrual and hymenal blood in the eighteenth century, which blurs the lines between menstruation and a symbolic defloration. Sara Read explains that "while the occasion of a woman's first sexual experience is a time which is often associated with some blood loss [...] this loss was, in some readings, thought to be the same blood as menstruation" (168). She goes on to suggest that Fanny herself is presented as menstruating or as being deflowered, symbolically at least, multiple times throughout the novel. She also explains how "'hymenal bleeding', the blood lost on first intercourse, was eroticised and even fetishised, in [the eighteenth century] as an extension of the cultural concerns about hymenal blood as a marker of virginity" (166). This notion provides an interesting angle to analyze the role of blood in Cleland's novel, since men's fetishization

of defloration can then be uncomfortably aligned with the presence of menstrual blood.

To explore this idea, the scene I wish to discuss is not one in which Fanny herself participates, but rather one where she witnesses a sexual act between another prostitute, Polly, and her client. After intercourse has taken place, Fanny observes, between the other girl's legs, "that recently opened wound, which now glowed with a deeper red" (Cleland 31). It is unclear whether the red described in this passage is caused by blood. Yet, considering the use of the word "wound", the imagery of the scene does suggest bleeding as a fitting explanation. There is no doubt that it is not hymenal blood: Phoebe explicitly tells Fanny that the "young Genoese merchant" has the habit to come to the brothel "twice or thrice a week" to see Polly (Cleland 28). It is thus possible that this is menstrual blood, especially if Polly's client comes every week, without making an exception to account for her menses. While Read pictures Fanny's symbolic defloration as the moment when Mr. Croft desires her (Read 171), the scene with Polly hints at another, subsequent defloration. I would suggest that, in this passage, Polly becomes Fanny's reflection, and her menstrual blood represents Fanny's hymenal blood, sealing the fate of Cleland's heroine. Indeed, Phoebe draws a clear link between Fanny's and Polly's bodies, whispering, "whether [Fanny] thought [her] little maiden-toy much less?" (Cleland 30) than Polly's. Furthermore, it seems to be in this scene, and not during her encounter with Mr. Croft, that Fanny truly

loses her status as a virgin and a woman of virtue. It is not when she is desired, but when she herself desires, that she is brought to the path of prostitution, because her sexual longing cannot be extinguished once it has been awakened.

Interestingly, by allowing Fanny to experience a symbolic defloration without actual bleeding, Cleland lets his heroine to explore her sexuality without male penetration. The voyeuristic nature of Fanny's experience separates her from the male body. Her position as an unseen witness of intercourse allows her to exist outside of male fantasies, at least for a time. Phoebe's advances towards Fanny similarly suggest the possibility of female pleasure without the presence of a man, which might counter the apparent male fantasies that appear in the rest of the book. However, in the end, Fanny happily leaves Phoebe behind to enjoy a lifetime of heterosexual experiences. In this instance, Cleland seems to acknowledge that male fantasies surrounding female bleeding ultimately necessitate the presence of a man. In fact, Fanny's sexual awakening with Phoebe is never associated with blood, which strengthens the perception that bleeding is a male fantasy that cannot be applied to lesbianism. Ultimately, it is the heterosexual nature of Fanny's desire that leads her to experience blood and violence as part of sex.

In an effort to place male fantasies at the core of his novel, Cleland tends to avoid images of blood with regards to the less pleasant aspects of female sexuality. For example, pregnancy is only touched upon briefly in *Memoirs of a Woman of*

*Pleasure*, despite the numerous sex scenes that could lead to impregnation. Thomas Alan Holmes remarks that "In *Memoirs*, one finds no abortifacents [*sic*], no infanticides, and no sales of unwanted infants. Instead, conception occurs only when the sexual partners love each other" (129). He then adds that "By downplaying the possibility of pregnancy, Cleland places further emphasis on the hierarchy of love over lust; debilitating pregnancies never occur to prevent Fanny from learning about pleasure; pregnancies never come to term unless the birth occurs in an atmosphere of love" (129). Indeed, Fanny conceives only with Charles, whom she loves, and her first pregnancy ends in a miscarriage when she learns that he is gone. The novel also reinforces the link between pregnancy and romantic feelings when Fanny expresses that she "miscarried of the dear pledge of [her] Charles's love" (Cleland 56). The miscarriage is not the loss of a baby, a child, or a foetus, but that of a symbol of shared love. Nonetheless, considering the bloodiness of the whole novel, it is surprising that Cleland includes such a quick and non-descriptive presentation of Fanny's miscarriage. In this passage, it is not the presence of blood, but rather its absence, that is telling. It becomes clear that blood is associated strictly with sex, and most often with intercourse. The consequences of sex, such as pregnancy, miscarriage, or labour, are glossed over because they are deemed unimportant to Cleland's narrative of male fantasies. In fact, the rare instances of conception in the novel suggest that Cleland is not interested in exploring all the implications of sex, but

only those pertaining directly to men's pleasure, especially the fetishization of defloration and, by extension, of female bleeding during penetration.

The loss of female virginity is therefore an important component of Cleland's narrative, and its depiction provides, perhaps, the most striking example of blood and violence as part of intercourse in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. When Fanny presents female virginity as "that darling treasure, that hidden mine, so eagerly sought after by the men, and which they never dig for, but to destroy" (Cleland 39), she highlights the violent nature of defloration and encourages deeper reflections on the reality of male fantasies. Moreover, Fanny's own defloration is a painful and bloody experience. She recounts how "one violent merciless lunge sent it [Charles' member], imbrew'd, and reeking with virgin blood, up to the very hilt in [her]" in such a way that "[her] thighs were instantly all in a stream of blood that flow'd from the wounded torn passage" (Cleland 41). The vocabulary used to describe the penetration is brutal, from the choice of words such as "violent", "merciless", "wounded", and "torn" to a vivid description of Fanny's bleeding. It is also interesting to note the similarity between the scene with Polly, whose sexual organs were presented as a "wound", and this one, where Fanny's own genitals are "wounded". By using a similar word choice to describe both, Cleland reinforces the connection between Polly and Fanny, and between the two scenes. Fanny's actual loss of virginity mirrors her symbolic defloration as a witness of Polly's bleeding.

This scene thus underlines that male fantasies, when they necessitate bleeding, can easily lead to the unnecessary violence and pain of the female partner. When Fanny decides that she is ready to lose her virginity after seeing Polly have sex with her client, she forgets the implications of defloration, much like a man might overlook such implications when he fantasizes about female blood. By emphasizing the violence and pain of Fanny's defloration, Cleland reminds his readers of the true realities hidden behind the fetishization of female blood.

In a similar manner, the presence of both rape attempts and actual rapes in the novel highlight the possible threat that accompanies sex, especially for women. When Mr. Croft tries to take Fanny's virginity without her consent, the young woman soon finds herself "stretch'd on the floor, my hair all dishevell'd, my nose gushing out blood" (Cleland 20). As mentioned previously, Read perceives this scene as the symbolic defloration of Fanny; according to her, "The blood at the most literal level can be taken as seen by the maid as referent to the hymenal blood that Hill would have lost had the rape proceeded: the nosebleed both substitutes and parodies a defloration" (171). Indeed, it does not seem purely coincidental that a failed defloration ends up in blood, much like an actual defloration supposedly would. By comparing Mr. Croft's rape attempt with Fanny's true loss of virginity, we can also note that both are violent in different ways. Mr. Croft is violent because he is trying to force Fanny to surrender. On the other hand, Charles is described as "merciless"

when he finally penetrates Fanny. *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* seems to show defloration as an act of violence, whether the act is consensual or not, which, one might argue, brings into question the notion of consent itself. Antje Schaum Anderson suggests that “rape does not exist in *Memoirs* because women are constructed as always willing” (116). With the exception of Mr. Croft’s assault, this might, indeed, be true. When Emily and Louisa share the tale of their defloration, what seems like rape soon turns out to be consensual (Cleland 96-111). Because sex is so strongly linked with pain, violence, and blood in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, it becomes difficult to differentiate between consensual and non-consensual acts. As Anderson notes, rape does not exist, because female consent does not matter: the male characters are the ones who must be pleased by sexual intercourse, not their female counterparts. In other words, women are erotic vessels for men’s needs and, as such, they cannot reject sex, even when it is threatening or painful. Despite many of them being prostitutes, Cleland’s female characters gain no agency through sex. They are merely subjected to it, whether they like it or not.

When Cleland chooses to depict both wanted and forced acts in bloody and violent ways, he successfully interrogates the consequences that male fantasies have on their willing partners. As previously mentioned, the novel portrays women as “victims” of sexual acts rather than as consensual partners, even if they have clearly agreed to intercourse. This suggests that male fantasies place women in a

position of submission and suffering, even when they are consenting. As Jad Smith argues, “the *Memoirs* proposes to normalize female judgment, so as to maximize the legitimacy of male desire. It ascribes the burden of sexual judgment to such women as Fanny and Mrs. Cole, who do not wish to limit male desire but, for the sake of love or profit, to serve it whenever possible” (185). This leads female characters to comply with male fantasies rather than challenge them. They are willing to suffer and to bleed because they get a payment in return, not because the practices are acceptable or even humane. Cleland uses Fanny’s willingness to cater to male fantasies to explore how harmful they can be when unrestrained, to the point where consensual relations are almost indistinguishable from non-consensual ones.

I would even suggest that Cleland’s portrayal of female pleasure is purposefully misrepresented to show the issues that arise when male fantasies are conflated with reality. In her analysis of pain and pleasure, Anderson argues that “Fanny welcomes her pain as the natural and necessary precondition to the pleasure with which it is soon fused” (116). This statement raises questions surrounding the realistic depiction of female pleasure. However, if we consider that Cleland consciously twists reality to force his readers to confront the problematic nature of male fantasies, an inaccurate portrayal of pleasure makes sense. The fusion between pain and pleasure, and women’s acceptance of it, are not meant to depict reality, but rather to represent male fantasies, which are



questionable at best. It would certainly be unrealistic to expect a woman to consider pain “natural and necessary” in order to obtain sexual pleasure. Outside of male fantasies, pain risks preventing pleasure rather than provoking it.

In fact, an interesting evolution of the theme of blood, sex, and violence comes when Fanny finally encounters sadomasochism, which brings these elements together through wipping and the subsequent bleeding that follows. Fanny describes how “the blood either spun out from, or stood in large drops on; and, from some of the cuts” after she administers the canning to Mr. Barvile (Cleland 147). Similarly, when her turn comes, “he twigg'd [her] so smartly as to fetch blood in more than one lash” (Cleland 149). This scene is the only one that shows a male character bleeding as part of an act of sexual nature. Nonetheless, the novel quickly rectifies that fact by presenting Mr. Barvile's sexuality as abnormal. He vainly tries to “provoke, and rouse to action his unactive, torpid machine” until “he blushingly own'd, that no good was to be expected from it, unless [Fanny] took in hand to re-excite its languid, loitering powers, by just refreshing the smart of the yet recent, blood-raw cuts, seeing it could, no more than a boy's top, keep up without lashing” (Cleland 151). Mr. Barvile does not simply appreciate pain mixed with pleasure, he requires it to be able to perform, which undermines his masculinity. The word “unactive” reminds us of a traditionally female passivity rather than of male action, and Mr. Barvile's blushing indicates that he, himself, is ashamed of his condition. Fanny also

subsequently rejects sadomasochism, making it clear that it is not the form of pain that she enjoys in sex, which further strengthens the impression that it is not a normal or healthy practice to pursue. In Cleland's novel, the conflation of pain and pleasure is enjoyed through penetration and intercourse rather than through other possible methods, such as canning. This certainly reflects conventional male fantasies, in which the woman is always the recipient of pain, while the man inflicts it. However, by including an instance in which blood, pain, and sex counteract male fantasies, Cleland draws the reader's attention to the other scenes in which the same elements are portrayed as desirable. Mr. Barvile's sexuality is arguably no *more* abnormal than male fantasies that depend on female pain and bleeding.

The end of the novel shows a similar shift away from a subtle criticism of male fantasies towards a more overt satire of men's sexual inclinations. Indeed, the scene between Fanny and Mr. Norbert is clearly used to ridicule the fetishization of defloration in eighteenth-century society. Cleland certainly invites his readers to question the value of female virginity when it can be both faked *and* monetized at the same time. Moreover, the scene uses an excessive show of pain and bleeding to mock male fantasies that would include such unrealistic expectations. Fanny first complains that she is “ruin'd” while “at the same time [keeping] her thighs so fast lock'd, that it was not for a strength like his to force them open, or do any good” (Cleland 133). This scene plays on the desire of Mr. Norbert to successfully “ruin”

the young woman by taking her virginity, but simultaneously derides that fantasy by making it impossible for him to carry on with the defloration. Fanny then feigns to suffer “with proper gestures, sighs, and cries of complaint, of which ‘that he had hurt [her] – he kill’d [her] – [she] should die –’ were the most frequent interjections” (Cleland 134). She continues “crying and complaining” (Cleland 135) throughout intercourse; yet, the reader knows that Fanny’s protestations are merely a pretense. This quickly turns Mr. Norbert into an object of ridicule, as he never questions the truth of Fanny’s virginity, despite her obvious efforts to make the experience as complicated as possible for him. In this scene, Cleland highlights Mr. Norbert’s naivety to show the unrealistic nature of his fantasies: true defloration would likely not be such a painful experience, despite the novel’s insistence that it is. Similarly, Mr. Norbert conflates his fantasy with reality when Fanny uses the sponge to reproduce hymenal bleeding, staining her “thighs, shift, and sheets” with red liquid (Cleland 135-136). He does not see past the subterfuge because he does not want to. His wish of living out his fantasy is greater than any possible doubt. In this passage, Cleland satirizes male fantasies by pointing out how unrealistic they are, and how they can be used to trick a man into spending his money on a false defloration.

Comparably, the scene in which Fanny witnesses two male lovers sleeping together serves to satirize homophobia through an obvious use of humour and ridicule. Since Cleland explores the fantasies of straight men, it is not surprising

to see male homosexuality rejected by the characters as “criminal” and “despicable” (Cleland 159). The young men are thought to be “stript of all the manly virtues of their own sex” (Cleland 158) and, indeed, at least one of them is presented as a “young sufferer” who both enjoys and deplors his partner’s attentions. This portrayal is similar to the constant ambiguity of female pleasure and paints him as feminine (Cleland 159). Nevertheless, the humourous tone of the scene counters the apparently serious condemnation of sodomy. Fanny is so overwhelmed by her outrage that she “jump’d down from [her] chair, in order to raise the house upon them, with such an unlucky impetuosity, that some nail or ruggedness in the floor caught [her] foot and flung [her] on [her] face with such violence, that [she] fell senseless on the ground” (Cleland 159). This scene clearly satirizes Fanny’s reaction by making her fall and hit her head, simultaneously ridiculing her and preventing her from causing any harm to the two men. Moreover, Fanny’s willingness to spy upon couples in such a voyeuristic way, which happens more than once over the course of the novel, can make the reader doubt her own morality. Philip E. Simmons suggests that “The ways in which Cleland's voyeuristic narrative invites the reader's complicity in both narrative act and represented event are central to the novelistic tradition and play an important role in those constructions of the reader's subjectivity that make the novel a vehicle for ideology” (63). Consequently, the reader can choose to side with Fanny’s homophobia despite her own moral

ambiguity, or they can use this scene to question their understanding of morality, including their possible disapproval of sodomy. Rather than bluntly telling his readers what they should think, Cleland uses satire to provoke deeper reflections on male fantasies and patriarchal ideals.

Finally, I would argue that, at the end of the novel, Cleland uses Charles to highlight the ambiguous nature of male fantasies. Charles starts out as a representation of men's ideals: he is the one who conquers Fanny's virginity and who gets her unconditional love in return. Gary Gautier notes that Fanny idealizes Charles: "Fanny describes Charles as 'tender, naturally polite, and gentle-mannered' (48). But when she goes on to say that any apparent discrepancy between this characterization and Charles's behaviour "could never be his fault" (48), she indicates a refusal to acknowledge any flaw in Charles's character and thereby loses credibility" (135). Fanny's willingness to blindly deny Charles' imperfections makes him the perfect reflection of male fantasies. However, when they are reunited, Fanny seems ecstatic when she learns that Charles is in a precarious situation, which counteracts her previous idealization. It is not only Charles' return which is a "blessing" for Fanny, but also that "Charles in distress! [That he is] reduc'd, and broke down to his naked personal merit" (Cleland 180). She even expresses how the circumstance "exceeded [her] utmost desires" (Cleland 180). Considering the patriarchal depiction of femininity and masculinity throughout the book, we could assume that Charles' monetary situation

would emasculate him and consequently make him less desirable in Fanny's eyes, but the opposite happens: she experiences a greater joy when she learns of his distress. Fanny enjoys her position of power as Charles' future saviour, since she possesses the means to ensure their financial stability. It is at this moment that Cleland shows his readers a possible alternative to both harmful patriarchal expectations and male fantasies. While the lovers still experience a "tender agony" (Cleland 185), there is no bleeding during intercourse, and Fanny's pleasure is devoid of pain, which is a step towards a more functional and equal portrayal of sexuality.

Without a doubt, in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Cleland interrogates male fantasies that transform sex into a bloody and violent experience for women. Indeed, by exaggerating the instances of bleeding and pain during intercourse, Cleland shows the unrealistic nature of the fetishization of female blood. While the criticism is subtle throughout the book, obvious examples of satire reinforce the idea that Cleland does not merely want to reproduce male fantasies, but rather seeks to question the validity of those inclinations. The variety of experiences of sexual intercourse described in the book thus serve to highlight the relationship between blood, sex, and violence in male fantasies, in order to prompt new reflections for the readers. To explain Fanny's compliance throughout the novel, Carol Houlihan Flynn argues that "for the eighteenth-century man or woman [...] feeling the pains, and even the terror invoked by the suffering of others, became

a commodity to be applied therapeutically” (288). Yet, Cleland achieves more than a simple demonstration of human suffering: he examines male fantasies as the cause of Fanny’s pain through the figure of blood and bleeding and offers a healthier alternative at the end of the novel with the

return of Charles. Ultimately, in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Cleland reveals the underlying threats that accompany sexual relations for women in a patriarchal society, in which a man’s pleasure is more important than a woman’s pain.

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# Special Interview

## Interview with Professor Heather Meek

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**Bio:** Heather Meek is Associate Professor of English in the Department of Literatures and Languages of the World at Université de Montréal. Her research explores the intersections of literary and medical cultures in the long eighteenth century, with a particular focus on the works of women and physician writers. Her recent work includes investigations of the affliction of ‘ennui’ (in *Disease and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); Frances Burney’s early nineteenth-century mastectomy narrative (in *Literature and Medicine*, 2017); Samuel Richardson’s relationship to the medical milieu of his time (in *Samuel Richardson in Context*, Cambridge UP, 2017); medical discourse and the rise of the novel (in *Literature and Medicine: The Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge UP, 2021); and eighteenth-century vocabularies of illness (*BMJ: Medical Humanities*, 2021). She is currently completing a book (funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant), titled *Re-Imagining Illness in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Medicine and the Woman Writer*.

**What advice do you have for a grad student seeking to submit for publication for the first time? Do you write first and submit later or get inspired by a CFP? What must one consider when it comes to choosing a publisher?**

Generally speaking, you write first. As a grad student, your thesis/dissertation work should be the priority. As a general rule, don’t attempt to refashion yourself for publication; rather, it is probably in your best interest to work with something you have already written and try to get it published. That said, there are scenarios in which you might move away from your thesis /dissertation work. You might see a CFP (perhaps here: <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu>), whose topic is close to something you previously wrote for a grad seminar or a conference; you might in this case easily tailor your previously-written paper. CFPs are often deliberately broad since editors assume each scholar will approach their topic from a different angle. An editor often allows their book collection or special issue journal to evolve based on the contributions they receive.

**How can a writer find what journals are best suited for their area of study?**

I would suggest looking at the bibliographies of your favourite articles and books to identify important publication venues in your field. Look at what publishers tend to publish in your field and keep your eyes open for their CFPs. For example, if you were working in my field, which is eighteenth-century studies and the history of medicine, journals I often read are *Literature and Medicine*, *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, and *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, so these are journals that you would naturally try to publish in. In taking this strategy, scholars come to understand what kinds of articles and approaches these journals are interested in. When it comes to publishing a book (which would generally happen after you complete your PhD), you might pay attention to the publishing houses of the books you tend to read to begin thinking about where you will eventually send your book proposal.

I would also suggest going to conferences, talking to your supervisors and professors, and asking graduate students and senior scholars in your field where they have published. Many scholars are very generous in terms of the advice they are willing to offer. If you’re on a panel

at a conference, you would usually be presenting alongside people interested in similar topics as you are, and you could propose getting together for coffee or lunch to chat. A downside of the COVID era is that there are few in-person conferences and thus such opportunities for mingling are few, but this is certainly temporary! My very first publication arose from a discussion I had with the chair of a conference session; he happened to be putting together a book collection related to the theme of this session, and my paper was a good fit. In short, being open and talking to people at conferences can be very fruitful in terms of making connections. Many conferences also organize mentorship sessions where senior scholars guide M.A. or Ph.D. students in one-on-one meetings.

**What does the submission landscape generally look like in academia? How would you say it has evolved in the last years with the advent of electronic platforms? What are the kinds of places an academic can publish articles?**

The submission landscape really varies. There are two main ways of publishing peer-reviewed work in the humanities. One is by publishing in an academic journal. Sometimes students publish in journals directed towards graduate students, which is a way of getting their feet wet before moving on to more prestigious journals. The second is book collections, each of which includes multiple papers, each by a different author. Book collections tend to be edited or co-edited by scholars, each of whom typically writes an essay as well as an introduction. Generally speaking, a prestigious journal is considered a better publication than a book collection, in part because the peer review process tends to be more rigorous for journal contributions, but this generalization does not always hold true, and it really depends on the collection. The peer-review process for a book collection usually occurs at the proposal stage (a proposal is sent out by the editors of the collection and usually includes, among many other things, contributors' abstracts rather than complete essays); once the proposal is approved, the editors vet essays which are often not sent out for external review. The blind peer-review process with a journal tends to be very rigid and sometimes quite cut-throat.

There's a considerable difference between publishing in a book collection and publishing in a journal. The former usually offers a more intimate and friendly experience. The editor of the collection might give you some advice or offer tips on a draft. You can ask questions as you go, and there is often an open email relationship. The final essay may have considerable revisions, but if your abstract is accepted in the early stages of the process, you can usually be fairly certain your piece will eventually be published. With journal publication, on the other hand, the editor is a relatively impersonal intermediary who sends your article out to peer reviewers and then provides you with their feedback once it is ready.

**How can a writer better understand the format and content that a publisher is looking for in their articles?**

By reading the articles in the relevant journal. You should also go to the journal website to look up their submission and author instructions. You must follow their house style, word count, and other guidelines. Following these instructions is very important!

**Should a writer send their article to several publishers at a time?**

The general rule is that you send your work to one publication venue at a time. Focusing on one, and then if that one doesn't work out for you, going to another one is generally the way it's done. That said, if for some reason you are committed to simultaneous submission, this



might be possible, but I would suggest first speaking with your editor(s) about this. Being honest and transparent, and maintaining a good relationship with your editor is important. In the world of scholarly publishing, academics put a lot of time into the peer view process, producing long reports, so it makes sense for scholars to work with one venue at a time only.

### **How can someone tell if their article is ready to be published?**

It's important to get other people, including your supervisor, to read your work. Everyone should have a reader, since you want your paper to be as strong as possible before submitting it. A publisher will expect to see something that's very polished and (nearly) ready to be published (for instance, a paper you submitted for a grad seminar should typically be reworked considerably). As you would for a term paper, make sure that your paper has a central argument; make sure that you have topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph; make sure that your writing is clear. Because the publishing process can be long, make sure that something important hasn't been published as you've been writing the article. Do a final search of the MLA bibliography and other databases to make sure your engagement with scholarship in the field is comprehensive. Also, be sure that your paper is free of grammatical errors and stylistic infelicities. I've served as a peer reviewer multiple times, and if I receive a paper that's badly written, it biases me against it. You are not giving your paper a fair chance if you submit something that's not carefully edited.

You also want to be looking at the specific journal in which you would like to publish, since all journals have different styles. Some journals expect a lot more documentation, like bulky footnotes and lengthy bibliographies, or a detailed critical engagement with the secondary material out there, while others welcome more 'conversational' papers and sparsely annotated essays. In short, look at where you want to submit your article and ensure that what you've done is consistent with what they expect.

### **What are the different stages an article goes through for publication?**

First, you would submit your essay – usually on an online platform for journals (and via email for edited collections). Your article will then get sent out to reviewers (usually two). Sometimes it takes editors a while to find appropriate reviewers, and then it can take even longer for these reviewers to send their reports. You may wait from several weeks to several months to receive readers' report. You will usually receive 2 reports for a journal article (one from each reviewer), with an accompanying assessment, usually 'rejected', 'revise with major revisions', 'revise with minor revisions', or 'accept with no revisions'. This fourth possibility is quite rare! The major revisions and rejections can be difficult to receive because reviewers are often direct and rigorous in their reports; this is because they expect your work to be of a very high standard. In the case of minor revisions, the revised article won't go out to the reviewers again; in most cases, the editor will just read, approve, send the piece out for copy editing. In cases of major revisions, typically, the revised essay goes out to reviewers for a second time, and they might or might not ask for more revisions; they might also decide to reject the article.

Once an article is accepted for publication, you will usually sign a contract, and then be put in touch with the copy editor. Eventually, after the final copy-edited version has been approved, you will receive proofs. Usually, when you get your proofs, you will be asked to turn them over within a few days, but you want to put aside time to read this document carefully. At this point, only the most minor of corrections can be made, but this is important because you don't want to find a typo in the middle of your article once it is in print. Proofs are really exciting to

receive because you know you're almost there, and the essay will look as it will on the printed page. And that's it! You'll see it in print usually fairly quickly after you submit your proofs.

**Do students generally publish their MA or Ph.D. dissertations? If so, are there different ways to do so?**

Yes and no. Some publishers are more open to this than others. Since most theses and dissertations are now made available online, publishers are less excited than they used to be about turning them into books because they're already out there. They usually want something that's quite different from the dissertation, or that has been significantly revised. Many Ph.D. and MA students decide to chop up their thesis/dissertation into articles. It depends on the style of your dissertation: some make more sense as articles, and some make more sense as books. Your supervisor and committee members can help you decide how to go about the publishing process. It's also worth doing your research since there's usually a wealth of information on each publisher's website which should give you a sense of what they're looking for.

For a monograph publication, you typically send out a proposal before you've completed the entire manuscript. The publisher would say, "yes, we're interested, send the manuscript." But before you send the proposal, you can send out a 'feeler' email to the publisher in which you would introduce yourself, present your book idea, and ask if they might be interested in receiving a proposal. They might say "no, we don't do that"; they might say "yes, sure"; or they might say, "no, but this publisher might be a better fit for you." You would send this email to the acquisitions editor, and transparency is important (i.e. let them know if it is a revised Ph.D. dissertation).

**What has been your experience of the publishing market?**

As a graduate student, I tended to lean on other people a lot for advice and for opportunities. My supervisor suggested me for one collection; I met someone at a conference who was putting together a volume; in another instance one of my professors turned down an invitation and suggested me as his replacement. It was all sort of happenstance. As a grad student, publishing in collections is a good way of getting things going. I didn't try to publish in a journal until I had my first job. Then again, things have changed a lot since 2007! Now, I think there's an expectation that your CV be a lot more complete as you are entering the job market. It's a lot more competitive now, and it's also harder to get published.

It took a long time for me to develop thick skin when it came to publishing. I still get very nervous when I get readers' reports, and, like many people, I have received some harsh ones that have made me doubt what I am doing. I have learned to be more thick-skinned, and I now appreciate the peer-review process more than I used too. For the last article that I published, I had this amazing reviewer. It was a 'major revisions' situation, but s/he was just so incredibly thorough, and her/his report was thoughtful and encouraging. The article was transformed because of her/his feedback; I took the advice, and it worked. Reports can be crushing, but if an author considers carefully the feedback they receive, it can genuinely improve their work. I suggest taking the criticism as constructive no matter how it is presented.

**Are there differences to consider between Quebec versus English-Canada, and Canada versus other countries?**

I can't really speak to Quebec versus English Canada because I've only ever published in the English world. As for Canada versus other countries, Canada has two big presses for books: McGill Queen's University Press and the University of Toronto Press. The UBC university press is also growing, I believe. In the States, there are a plethora of good university presses; I believe that there is a [Wiki](#) page that ranks them in terms of prestige. There are the Ivy League university presses, which are usually among the most admired ones. You also have commercial presses like Palgrave Macmillan or Routledge, which are bigger and produce more books. Some people prefer to publish with smaller presses. Your choice of press might depend on your field. For example, in my field eighteenth-century studies, Delaware University Press is really good, but people outside of my field wouldn't know that, so this creates something of a dilemma. Your choice of a press might also depend on your level of ambition, or how much of a relationship you would like to have with your editor, since smaller publishing houses might come with less prestige but more warm and fulfilling professional relationships.

### **Is there anything to consider when writing bios and abstracts?**

Abstracts are important. You'll have an abstract for a journal article, but usually not for a book collection essay. Some people will only read the abstract and nothing more, so you want to make sure it's good and clear and that it captures all the salient points of your article. The bio should follow the guidelines of the journal/collection.

There is another kind of abstract altogether: the one that you submit in the early stages to get accepted into a book collection. This one is usually produced before the article is written, so you really need to make sure that you're pitching an idea that's good, that shows how what you're doing is original and how it is consistent with the CFP or the aims of the collection description that you've read. This abstract for the book collection won't ever see the public light, but it's important in getting article accepted.

### **How does one deal with a rejection letter?**

Grad students generally face rejections at some point, and so do professors. I recently had to do some major revisions on an essay. When I looked at the accompanying reviews, I was very discouraged, even though I know at this point in my career that it's very important not to take it personally. Most academics are harsh with the aim of making something better, not with the aim of making you feel bad. It's important to understand that your work is not you! It's academia, and it's a cold world in many ways. We all produce work that is imperfect, and there are always things to improve. I would suggest taking the feedback and turning it into something positive.

If your article is rejected, then you can consider sending it elsewhere. Oftentimes, with a rejection comes detailed feedback, which you can use as an opportunity for extensive revisions. You might see these reviews as a service that the journal has provided. Use the reviews, revise, resubmit elsewhere, and see what happens. Occasionally reviews seem excessively harsh or unfair; in these instances, it is important for an author to think carefully about how much of a reviewer's commentary they would like to use.

### **Are there any challenges to the editing process that one can expect?**

Very occasionally, you'll have reviewers who will offer conflicting advice. In such cases, an editor will usually step in and guide you. It's also your call whether you want to resubmit based

on the reports you've received. You usually have to address each of the comments, so you'd write a letter to explain what you've done and oftentimes, as part of the electronic submission process, you will also be asked to submit an additional file that makes visible (usually using "track changes") the revisions you have undertaken. This can be a lot of work, and it's oftentimes a very long process from start to finish.

If there is something that your peer reviewer says that you don't agree with, that can be a bit challenging if they're expecting you to address everything. Generally speaking, an editor will understand that you will not necessarily address every single point. If a reviewer has misunderstood your approach in some way, which does happen, you should be (politely) assertive to make sure your article remains close to what you want it to be. Remember that what appear in print is there indefinitely, with your name on it! That said, taking a humble position is always a good idea, so I would suggest carefully considering a reviewer's comments before deciding to what extent you will incorporate them in the revision process.



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With all of our sincerest thanks,

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