

I. Margaret Atwood and the Body-Identity Link in *The Edible Woman*

Margaret Atwood critic Coral Ann Howells, writing about the 1981 Atwood novel *Bodily Harm*, is one of the few critics who discuss the connection between the protagonist's body and the formulation of identity in Atwood's novels. Speaking of the protagonist Rennie's disease in the novel, Howells notes:

Rennie is first and most shockingly to herself a victim of her own body's betrayal, and arguably the diagnosis of breast cancer and her subsequent mastectomy is the central trauma of her life. The knowledge of her cancer is a radical assault on her subjective sense of identity which in turn is closely related to the mesh of personal and social myths through which Rennie projects her own image of herself. (113)

This analysis emphasizes Howells's belief in the importance of Rennie's body to the character's sense of identity. According to Howells, it is Rennie's cancer that causes her to question the stability of her own identity, and the resulting confusion ends in a fragmented and disparate sense of her identity. One can go on to speculate that this body's experience with trauma through cancer is a way to not only re-formulate the normal concept of identity, but also to call into question the presumed stability of identity and highlight its underlying construction. Through the trauma of cancer, the concept of a stable identity is undermined. Therefore, the body's role as supporter of gender identity norms is upset in the presence of disease, which allows the construction of gender norms to be emphasized through the body. This subversive power of the female body allows a new perspective on Atwood texts. In this thesis, I analyze how Atwood plays with characters and situations in order to show the inherent constructedness of gender identity.

Demonstrating this construction of gender identity is essential to questioning and then undermining the presumed stability of both gender identity as well as discourse in general. Just as Rennie begins to question the falsity of her seemingly stable identity at the point her body defies her, Atwood's other protagonists rethink their identity when their bodies cause trouble. This is a recurring theme throughout several Atwood texts, although Atwood critics have never focused on the subject to this extent.

While gender is a central concept to Atwood novels, few critics have dealt with the evident construction of gender in the texts. Atwood criticism ranges from reading Atwood alongside fairy tales, analyzing the Gothic element in the texts, and looking at Foucauldian conceptions of power among the relationships in a novel. Criticism of Atwood's early work reads her writing through the lens of second-wave feminism, usually reading her texts in tandem with other feminist novels of the 1960s and 70s, emphasizing Atwood's political message while deconstructing the ways in which men oppress the women protagonists. While this method has undoubtedly produced several interesting readings of Atwood, for that reason many critics rely on second-wave feminism as the only useful way to read Atwood's early novels. As a result, these books have been left behind by scholars and are considered dated.

In this thesis, I make a research on Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*. The story of the novel follows a year in the life of Marian MacAlpin, a single 24-year-old living in Toronto and working at a consumer surveys company. Disappointed in her job, unhappy with her choice of friends, and ambivalent about her boyfriend Peter, Marian sees her life as potentially out of control, and so ends up engaged to Peter for a sense of security. She feels herself slipping away, her personality being consumed alternatively by

Peter and society, and seeks out rescue in the form of Duncan, a self-absorbed graduate student. Marian's behavior becomes more and more unpredictable, frightening her. This uncontrolled behavior results in an eating disorder, the main focus of the story. Acting as if with a will of its own, her body cuts her off from foods one by one, until one day when she can eat nothing at all. Suspicious of Peter, fearing he will consume her, Marian runs to Duncan for comfort. When she realizes Duncan cannot save her from her problem, she finally takes action on her own in the form of baking a cake. She makes it in the shape of a woman and presents it as her substitute for Peter to consume. He balks at the offer and breaks the engagement. Suddenly, Marian is hungry again, and eats the cake with relish, which cures her of her eating disorder. Sometime later, Duncan visits her and finishes the cake (as well as the last line of the novel), leaving an ending wide open to interpretation.

This novel, written in 1965 on the cusp of the women's movement, was published in 1969 and embraced by feminists. Despite the fact that the novel was never intended to have a feminist message (and indeed Atwood had not even conceived of feminism as such when it was written), critics have consistently read the novel as a product of, or influenced by, the second-wave feminist movement. While this type of criticism is often fruitful to reading Atwood texts, I intend to add to Atwood criticism by analyzing a text from a different angle, one that looks beyond the boundaries of the cultural moment. I recover this novel in order to discover a new, critical theory-based perspective that digs deeper into Atwood's text, taking into account her unique style and tone, and the ways in which she undermines reader's expectations by playing with stock characters in a radical way. Even though previous readings have interpreted it as a product of the second-wave feminist movement, *The Edible Woman* has the potential to be much more than critics

have previously believed. While the novel may appear at first to resemble the structure of a second-wave feminist novel—with stock characters like passive, unhappy women and manipulative, suspicious men, and with a plot that ends without marriage, but rather with the defiant woman successfully on her own—the novel actually does much more than its oversimplified plot might suggest. It is a surprisingly complex novel, combining a biting wit, parody, and elements of fantasy into what becomes a comic novel that is only matched in tone by a few of Atwood's later short stories and poetry. The fact that the protagonist constantly works (and fights) against what the text is doing is a testament to the importance of the novel. Atwood is working with the complex and quite radical concept of playing with and questioning gender norms and it is only by an analysis of her subversive methods that one can gain a completely new perspective on her first novel. In this thesis, this research analyzes the function of the body as a possible rupturing force by using Butler's concept of subversion through re-signification. It is the complexity of the body, as well as its centrality within the discursive system, that make it a potentially subversive space. As Butler states, discourse (as a part of a larger set of laws) forms and regulates the body. By discourse, it refers to the Foucauldian notion of the discursive formation, which is a set of assumptions that form and influence a way of thinking and expressing ideas on certain fundamental subjects, in this case, gender. According to Butler, the body (through actions taken upon it) can be interpreted as citing discourse in a manner that either reaffirms or complicates gender assumptions. For example, drag performances are a type of subversive bodily act Butler studies. A drag performance disrupts gender norms by performing gender in a completely different way. A man performing femininity disrupts gender norms because it exposes the act as constructed—

gender norms would be supported if the feminine performance was acted by a female. Through the act of gender performativity, the body can be interpreted as questioning the stability of gender norms through its act of disruption. Through this act of re-citation, I add to Butler by arguing that the body plays an integral role in the creation of identity. Once one notes the body's centrality to the formulation of identity, it is clear that the role of the body is not only the central term in this model of identity formation, but is the mediating influence between discourse and identity.

In this linear model, discourse must be interpreted and re-inscribed through the body in order to construct identity. In other words, the body takes the assumptions offered by discourse and re-cites it in various ways—such as through irony, abjection, or mimicry—to form identity. It may cite discourse to support the patriarchal discursive assumptions, or it may subvert those norms by re-interpreting discourse in order to question the fixity of gender. The body, then, is the central site of discourse mediation, and thus the body has a potentially significant effect on the formulation of identity. Thus, the power of the body's appropriation and re-inscription of discourse has many interesting possibilities, one of which is subversion.

While identity is constructed by discourse, it is the crucial secondary role of the body's mediation of that discourse that determines the final effect of identity. However, to name the body as mediator is not to imply that it has total agency. In this model, it is important to note that the body gains agency through its ability to destabilize the norms of gender. The body is not a conscious subject; it is merely the space where disruption occurs. The actions—like disease—are not created by the body, but are interpreted as occurring on the body, and that disruption on the body results in an interpretation that

questions gender norms. It is important to establish that the body is not an active subject, but a highly visible space where interpretations of disruptions can occur. Through the re-citation of discourse that occurs in the bodily space, identity can either support or contest the law of gender norms. It is this latter function, the ways in which the body re-cites discourse to contest the laws of identity, which is the focus of my study.

To analyze the function of the body as subversive space, the research looks at the body in action, as interpreted through a literary text. *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood's first published novel, is an excellent and yet unexplored source of gender questioning and subversion. Gender is contested in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly, among virtually all the characters on several levels. Furthermore, the researcher argue that the novel's ironic tone as well as its use of parody and fantasy contribute to the identification of gender identity as constructed, and the novel as a whole calls into question the stability of gender. This analysis discusses the novel's problem with language, and explores its suggestion for dealing with it. Throughout this text, the female body is used to mediate the formulation of identity through the re-citation of discourse that occurs on its bodily space.

In writing this analysis, Butler's theories of performativity and re-citation of discourse have been fundamental to my conception of the body as subversive mediator. First, to demonstrate Butler's theory in practice, I analyze performativity in the text, looking at the ways in which Atwood defines gender as constructed in *The Edible Woman*, and how the characters' use of irony contributes to showing gender's construction. In the second chapter, I come back to my own argument and analyze the variety of ways in which the law of gender can be subverted by the body. Here I take a

closer look at the role of disease in the novel, as well as discuss the subversive effectiveness of abjection and mimesis.

Finally, I conclude with a discussion that focuses on the main problem inherent in the novel (and, possibly, my model as well): the issue of language. Language is a problem to the protagonist in *The Edible Woman*, and her efforts to deal with language are potentially problematic in themselves. Language complicates bodily disruption because it is inherently impure—language constantly has the potential to mislead or lie—and thus language must always be questioned. Bodily acts, however, are less likely to mislead and are able to be interpreted more accurately than language, precisely because bodily acts can exist outside the limits of language. This Butlerian reading of Atwood contributes to discussions on the function of the body as central to identity, and rethinks the body as mediator of discourse and potential subversive space.

II. From Atwood's *Bodies* to Butler's *Bodies*: Bodily Subversions

In order to analyze the subversive possibility of the female body in Atwood, a critical framework is needed. I focus on the writings of Judith Butler, which offer productive ways to read gender construction. Her work in gender identity and the way in which the body's performance of gender is key to either supporting or questioning gender's stability serves as a basis for my model, where the body's performance is central to defending or subverting gender norms. While her first book, *Gender Trouble*, introduces the concept of gender performativity—arguing that gender is not stable, but a repeated performance of the body—her next book, *Bodies that Matter*, rethinks this performance idea. It focuses on the possibilities that open up after one realizes the constructedness of gender. It is from here that I make my claim. If one realizes the subversive potential of the body as a major contributing factor in the formulation (and re-formulation) of identity, then what are the ultimate benefits of disruption? To what extent does the female body have power, especially in this society of idealized (and constructed) feminine images? Finally, what is Atwood's point in showing the reader that gender is constructed? These are the key issues I use to focus my analysis. Drawing on Butler to analyze the constructions of gender apparent within Atwood's text, I argue that the female body functions to mediate the formulation of identity.

Throughout Judith Butler's writing, she emphasizes the constructedness of gender. Along with gender being constructed, it also produces itself continually through its own performance, thereby eliminating any notion of preexisting subject or identity (*Gender*, 33). This analysis of the performativity of gender construction and re-construction is original to Butler. Other theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce

Irigaray, have considered the notion of gender construction in their writings, but none have focused on it and the nature of its (unnatural) construction in so much detail before. Butler speculates not only on the fact that gender is unnatural, but studies the potential ways gender can be constructed, arguing that: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (43-44). It is critical to Butler that gender is not something that is merely performed, but is repeated constantly to create the illusion of a singular, stable gender.

In her book *Bodies that Matter*, Butler concerns herself with not only clarifying the ideas she first wrote about in *Gender Trouble*, but also focuses on the subversive possibilities an idea of gender as continuously constructed affords. Butler begins her argument by taking Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation and applying it to the announcement of a baby’s sex at birth, which Butler calls “girling” (*Bodies*, 7). The baby is then interpellated as a girl and created as a subject through language. As Butler makes clear, “[T]hat ‘girling’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect” (8). Naming, then, limits and reinforces the identity, and begins the process of required repetition of gender norms.

Butler notes interpellation’s weaknesses by analyzing the spaces it opens up for subversion, namely through the repetition of a process she terms “citationality.” Subversion does not exist through citing (or assuming) gender one single time. Instead, the potential for rupture hinges on the fact that gender must always be re-cited continually for it to be successful—a weakness Butler notes as essential for subversion.

Every time gender must be re-cited, or performed again, there is the possibility of a re-interpretation of gender which subverts the law of gender and calls its naturalness and fixity into question. As Butler states, it is the law itself that produces the possibility of its own disruption: “Here the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law” (*Bodies*, 122). It is these consequences, or subversive acts, that I will focus on later in my thesis. For right now, it is important to note the possibility—indeed, the inevitability—of rupture of the law of gender. I believe this kind of subversion is inevitable precisely because of re-citation. Since the gender performance must be reproduced constantly to keep up an illusion of stability, the chance that any single re-citation might go awry and open up a space for reinterpretation are greatly increased. Therefore, because of re-citation of gender norms, the chances of disruption are increased to the point that it is nearly inevitable.

Body as Subversive Space

In an even more radical move, Butler argues that the body as well as identity are constructed: both are constructed by discourse, as is gender. In addition, both need to be continually re-formed and re-cited to achieve the appearance of stability, just like gender. It is precisely this act of re-citing identity that is vital to my argument. As with gender, there is no originary referent, no presupposed subject that does this performance. Both the body and identity are constructed through discourse. Butler calls the concept of matter (that is, the materiality of the physical body) into question when she reads it “not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (*Bodies*, 9). Butler does not see

bodies as stable, uniform objects, but instead as a repeated process of acts that are reinforced so consistently that they take on the appearance of fixed, singular objects. Once again, it is the process of re-citation through discourse that creates this imitation of stability and naturalness. It is this appearance of stability that re-citation can allow bodies to become disruptive forces, questioning gender norms.

Performing Gender: From de Beauvoir to Butler: The Construction of Gender

Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement formed the basis for viewing gender not as a fixed identity, but as a construction, influenced by the discourse of the culture surrounding a woman. As de Beauvoir says, "it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an *Other*" (267). Therefore, "woman" is not a natural state, but an amalgam of discourse, created and formed by culture. De Beauvoir also stresses the cultural compulsion to take on a certain gender. Here, gender as a performance is implied, but not explicitly commented upon. It is interesting to note that de Beauvoir, writing in 1949, was not the first theorist to describe the constructed nature of gender identity. Joan Riviere, in her 1929 essay "Womanliness as Masquerade," implies gender's construction by describing femininity—or, to use her term, "womanliness"—as a performance. Using psychoanalytic theory, Riviere analyzes several case studies of women who act masculine in their careers and perform womanliness at other times. Riviere argues these women perform womanliness because of their fear of retribution from the men in their lives (130). She gives an example of a woman intellectual whose need for reassurance in her success as a writer and speaker led her to flirt with several men after her speech. Riviere analyzes this as an

attempt to protect herself from any possible retaliation from a man regarding her masculine performance. As Riviere states, “the aim of the compulsion [to perform womanliness] was not merely to secure reassurance by evoking friendly feelings towards her in the man; it was chiefly to make sure of safety by masquerading as guiltless and innocent” (133). This woman performs her gender correctly to make up for her earlier disruption of gender roles during her speech.

Not only does Riviere discuss the notion of gender as something to perform, but she also highlights the construction of gender itself. She describes womanliness as something that “could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (133). The feminine gender, according to Riviere, is something one puts on out of a compulsion from culture to act appropriately. By the end of the essay, Riviere begins to question the difference between true womanliness and the mask itself. She claims that they are the same thing, and therefore femininity is a construction, just like the mask (133).

Judith Butler, however, has taken this concept further. Instead of performing gender for certain purposes as in Riviere’s analysis, Butler claims gender is always performed and repeated constantly, within a strict regulatory framework that forces gender to be performed in a certain way. She explicitly states that gender identity is constructed by the discourse of gender norms, citing de Beauvoir’s original idea that one becomes a woman, rather than being born one (*Gender*, 12). While Butler does use de Beauvoir as a reference for her argument, she goes on to speculate further about the assumed subject that takes on gender. Both de Beauvoir and Riviere speak of gender construction and performance as if a speaking, identifiable subject actively does it, as if

there is an actor behind the act. In contrast, Butler stresses the point that a subject does not take on gender as if it were a costume—gender’s performativity is forced through a set of regulatory ideals (*Gender*, 13). Through her analysis of de Beauvoir, Butler in fact complicates the idea of “woman” even more, since woman is not a stable concept, but a construction continually created and re-created by discourse. This complication opens up interesting possibilities and leads to new questions about the performativity of gender.

This chapter attempts to analyze the various ways Atwood highlights gender as a construction. Gender is shown to be constructed through the character’s frequent performances as a certain gender. As will become clear, Atwood’s unique tone and choice of words allows her to expose gender as performative (and thus unnatural).

Policing Gender Norms in Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*

Being in control is a recurring image in *The Edible Woman*, and to be in control most often means performing gender appropriately. The simple fact that the characters even feel gender needs to be policed shows its construction. Marian, the protagonist of the novel, is perhaps the most aware of this—she is always concerned what others are thinking of her. She fears that if she does not perform her gender appropriately, she will be punished. One character she is most afraid of throughout the novel is her landlady, also referred to as the “lady down below.” She always feels “trapped” when the landlady stops her at the door of her apartment (5). The landlady only ever bothers Marian, and she supposes that “she’s decided Ainsley [Marian’s roommate] isn’t respectable, whereas I am. It’s probably the way we dress” (6). The landlady’s comments and queries about their life worry Marian, but not Ainsley. Marian explains the difference in this way: “Ainsley doesn’t come from a small town as I do, so she’s not as used to people being

snoopy; on the other hand she's not as afraid of it either. She has no idea about the consequences" (7). Marian feels it is up to her to appear as a proper young woman, and perform femininity adequately. Otherwise, Marian feels, they may lose the apartment. The only way they got the apartment was through performing femininity; Marian remembers their interview: "We had agreed I would do the talking and Ainsley would sit and look innocent, something she can do very well when she wants to. [. . .] On this occasion I had even got her to wear gloves" (7). Marian has tried hard to cover up Ainsley's inappropriate performance of gender so they will have a place to live.

Throughout the novel, Marian feels "forbidden to do everything" (8) because of her landlady's constant observation of them. They never know when they are being watched. According to Marian, "Ainsley is convinced that the lady down below comes upstairs when we aren't there and looks round our apartment and is silently horrified, and even suspects her of ruminating over our mail" (7). Ainsley also remarks, "On still nights, I can hear her burrowing through the woodwork" (8). To Marian and Ainsley, the lady down below might be watching them at any time.

The role of the landlady can be understood using Foucault's writing on the Panopticon. In describing the Panopticon, Foucault says, "[I]t reverses the principle of the dungeon; [. . .] full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness [. . .] Visibility is a trap. [. . .] [The inmate] is seen, but does not see" (200). It is this visibility of the inmate and invisibility of the supervisor that makes the inmate constantly aware of his actions, for fear of being seen at any moment. The result of this is, as Foucault states, "the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (201). They have internalized the constant observation and now

are able to discipline themselves, because of the uncertainty of being seen at any time by the supervisor. The Panopticon is successful because of not only visibility, but also especially the fact that power is unverifiable: the inmate is never certain when he is being watched, and so acts as if they are being observed constantly. It is this uncertainty that is the key to understanding why the landlady elicits such a reaction. With her landlady, Marian is uncertain. She does not know her landlady well, and is suspicious of that unknown. Marian feels that her landlady could be watching or listening at any time, and she has no idea when. This uncertainty allows the landlady to have power over Marian. Because Marian has no idea when she is being watched, she acts as if she is being observed all the time when she is in her apartment, and forces her to constantly perform her gender appropriately. Marian fears this uncertainty, and allows it to have power over her actions, causing her to internalize the landlady's judgment and perform her femininity correctly, even when alone. Moreover, the fact that Marian fears performing her gender inappropriately—as opposed to naturally existing as a gender—emphasizes the fact that gender is not natural and is constructed by discourse.

Gender as Performance

One of the most obvious instances of gender performance in *The Edible Woman* occurs early in the novel when Ainsley, the roommate of protagonist Marian, chooses to dress and act as an ultra-feminine young woman. Usually, Ainsley is a somewhat messy, opinionated woman, often worrying Marian's co-workers with her taboo, "uncomfortable" speech (18) and irritating Peter with, as he says, her "'wishy-washy radical' views" (68). She enjoys reading about Behaviorism and Psychoanalysis, and with her bedroom full of anthropology books, Ainsley also revels in analyzing other's

problems (39). But here, she is quite different. In the scene, Marian and her boyfriend (and soon-to-be-fiancé) Peter are dining in a restaurant with Marian's college friend Len. Having overheard Marian and Peter's conversation about Len earlier, Ainsley decided to invite herself and surprise them all—most especially Marian—by showing up to their dinner, dressed extremely feminine to attract Len. Describing Ainsley's appearance that night, Marian says:

Ainsley was not overdressed. She had dug out from somewhere a cotton summer creation I'd never seen before, a pink and light-blue gingham check on white with a ruffle around the neck. Her hair was tied behind her head with a pink bow and on one of her wrists she had a tinkly silver charm bracelet. Her make-up was understated, her eyes carefully but not noticeably shadowed to make them twice as large and round and blue, and she had sacrificed her long oval fingernails, biting them nearly to the quick so that they had a jagged schoolgirlish quality. (69)

Ainsley's drastically changed appearance shows, through Marian's description, the unnaturalness of gender. It is clear Ainsley went to a lot of trouble to look girlish—wearing an outfit Marian had never seen before, “carefully” using eyeshadow to make her eyes rounder (and more innocent), and “sacrific[ing]” her fingernails by biting them short to create the appearance of a young, innocent girl. Throughout the dinner, Ainsley is silent, “giving short, shy answers,” and blushing or responding in a breathless voice when she does speak (69). This action is such a reversal of her usual personality that it nearly makes Marian sick to watch her, saying, “I almost choked” (69). Marian describes watching her, noting the deceptiveness of Ainsley's appearance:

Ainsley sat silent, her eyes lowered, jiggling her icecube around in her gingerale glass. I studied the latest version of herself, thinking that it was like one of the large plump dolls in the stores at Christmastime, with washable rubber-smooth skin and glassy eyes and gleaming artificial hair. Pink and white. (70)

Clearly, Ainsley is creating a performance of femininity in this scene. From Marian's point of view, the reader understands Ainsley's actions as a performance and a construction. Len, though, believes Ainsley to be authentically feminine and is attracted to her. Through Ainsley, Atwood shows how easily gender can be performed to look "real," which in effect highlights its constructedness, as there is no such thing as "real" gender. Also, Atwood plays with the different ways gender can be interpreted—Marian calls Ainsley's performance a "fraud," while Peter is amused but suspicious, and Len is completely taken in by her presumed authenticity. While Butler emphasizes the fact that gender is performative, she does not mean to say that a subject is able to take on gender. The important part of Butler's theory is that performativity exists "within a highly rigid regulatory frame"—meaning that it is the expectations and assumptions of discourse that enable gender's performativity, not subjects themselves (*Gender*, 43-44). Ainsley does not consciously choose her gender like she has chosen her wardrobe. Instead, Ainsley is responding through performance to the patriarchal expectations that inform this regulatory frame—she dresses as a young, innocent girl not just because she chooses to, but rather because the regulatory expectations (specifically, Len) demand this type of performance from her.

The key to understanding this scene is to realize Ainsley's motivation for her performance. Earlier in the novel, she reveals to Marian her desire to have a baby. Marian tries to talk her out of it, especially because Ainsley is determined to have a child without marriage. "The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands," Ainsley declares (38). Against Marian's protests, Ainsley replies, "'Every woman should have at least one baby.' She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer. 'It's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity'" (39). Ainsley's belief of a "true" femininity here shows how she has internalized the regulatory frame of gender. This comment proves Ainsley did not choose to dress as a young woman because she wanted to, but dressed that way because she subscribes to the rigid regulatory frame of gender and believes that, through this type of performance, she will be successful in seducing Len and fulfilling her femininity with a child. Marian's ironic comment to Ainsley's inappropriately banal response here emphasizes not only the absurdity of Ainsley's plan but also undercuts her idea of "natural" femininity. Ainsley's motivation is especially ironic, since in the restaurant scene her actions imply its unnaturalness through the necessity of performing femininity. Through an implicit support of gender norms by performing femininity to seduce Len, Ainsley unwittingly also deconstructs the fixity of gender through her performance.

Marian's ironic and humorous take on the plan is clear throughout, both in her narration and in her comments to Ainsley, which end up questioning Ainsley's idea of a "real" femininity. Marian asks her, tongue-in-cheek, "But what about a father for it? I know it's a small technical detail, but you will need one of those, you know, if only for a short time. You can't just send out a bud" (40). After her response, Marian notes that

Ainsley “reminded me more than I liked of a farmer discussing cattle-breeding” (41). Unknown to Marian, Ainsley decides Len is the best candidate for the position. Since she knows Len is attracted to young, inexperienced girls, Ainsley acts the part in order to seduce him. Once Marian sees an extremely feminine Ainsley show up unannounced at their dinner, she realizes in horror how serious Ainsley was: “I could see she was determined” (69). Marian is upset, worrying if she should tell Len about Ainsley’s trickery. To Ainsley, she says, “it doesn’t seem ethical. It’s like bird-liming, or spearing fish by lantern or something” (72). Even when upset, Marian still has a biting wit. Her disgust is evident through her ironic comments, such as her description of Ainsley in Len’s apartment later that evening: “She registered neither pleasure nor boredom; her inert patience was that of a pitcher-plant in a swamp with its hollow bulbous leaves half-filled with water, waiting for some insect to be attracted, drowned, and digested” (78). To Marian, Ainsley is a wolf in sheep’s clothing to Len. By playing innocent and simple, she will use him to get pregnant, and then consequently get rid of him.

On one level, Ainsley’s performance in this scene parallels Butler’s theory: Ainsley demonstrates the performative demands of the regulatory ideal of gender. By indicating that femininity is a performance demanded of a female subject, Ainsley’s literal (i.e., non-Butlerian) performance of femininity illustrates how the strict regulations of gender norms inform one’s actions. The scene shows that Ainsley does not choose this performance, but is forced into it in order to get what she believes the regulatory ideal demands of her: a baby. Also in this scene, Atwood’s own voice takes part in re-citation as well. Atwood uses Marian to note the ridiculous and ironic performance of Ainsley’s gender. By noting that Ainsley speaks of the necessity of babies as if they were nothing

more than hair-dryers, likening Ainsley's plan to "cattle-breeding" and "bird-liming," and describing Ainsley's actions in a variety of ridiculous ways from doll-like to a "pitcher-plant," Marian uses irony to approach gender discourse in an unfamiliar way. Through Marian's tongue-in-cheek interpretation of Ainsley's actions, Atwood re-cites the discourse of gender norms by using language to highlight the absurdity of the gender performance. Instead of speaking seriously about femininity like Ainsley does (which supports gender norms), Marian's comically ironic comments question and destabilize preexisting notions of gender. In this way, irony functions to highlight the construction of gender.

Lucy, a co-worker and acquaintance of Marian, also demonstrates the performativity of gender under the regulatory ideal and is observed in an ironic way by Marian, who highlights Lucy's constructed identity. Referred to by Ainsley as an "office virgin," Lucy's primary goal is to get a man. Marian describes her style of dress as "elegant" (118). Marian also describes Lucy and her practice of eating out at fancy restaurants where rich men lunch, as

trailing herself like a many-plumed fish-lure with glass beads and three spinners and seventeen hooks through the likely-looking places [. . .] where the right kind of men might be expected to be lurking, ravenous as pike, though more martially inclined. But those men, the right kind, weren't biting [. . .] And in this restaurant, and similar ones, it was in vain that Lucy displayed her delicious dresses and confectionery eyes to the tubfulls of pudgy guppies who had no time for mauve. (118)

Marian's ironic detachment in this scene once again highlights the obvious performance of femininity in which Lucy is taking part. Just as she compared Ainsley to a Christmas doll and a pitcher-plant, Marian's ironic comparison of Lucy to an unsuccessful fishing lure emphasizes the incredible absurdity of her actions, as well as the unnaturalness of gender.

The farce of gender construction is also exposed at Marian's job. Marian works at Seymour Surveys, a consumer product testing company. She describes the company as "layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle" (13). This is an especially ironic description, since the top floor consists of "the men upstairs" (13), the executives and psychologists; the basement holds the blue-collar workers in the machinery and mailroom; and her own floor, consisting entirely of single women or part-time housewives. Her job is to take the technical and complicated surveys written by the psychologists and rewrite them into simpler, more understandable language. However, she says her actual job duties "are still vaguely defined" (13), and on occasion is asked to give a survey. In the novel, she is forced to do survey work over the Labor Day weekend for their client, Moose Beer. The company needs consumer testing to determine the effectiveness of their new advertising campaign. Marian takes one morning, visits likely Moose Beer drinkers (i.e., men) at their homes, and asks them questions about their drinking habits and their reactions to the new radio ad. It is the gender assumptions made in the advertisement that is interesting to analyze. Marian recounts the lyrics of the ad:

A deep bass voice, accompanied by what sounded like an electric guitar, sang: *Moose, Moose, /From the land of pine and spruce, /Tingly, heady,*

rough-and-ready. . . . Then a speaking voice, almost as deep as the singer's, intoned persuasively to background music, Any real man, on a real man's holiday—hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing—needs a beer with a healthy, hearty taste, a deep-down manly flavour. The first long cool swallow will tell you that Moose Beer is just what you've always wanted for true beer enjoyment. Put the tang of the wilderness in YOUR life today with a big satisfying glass of sturdy Moose Beer. (21)

Of the ad campaign, Marian says, “I didn’t think it was very original but I admired the subtlety” (22). She imagines this ad geared toward “the average beer-drinker, the slope shouldered pot-bellied kind,” who, after hearing this ad, “would be able to feel a mystical identity with the plaid-jacketed sportsman shown in the pictures with his foot on a deer or scooping a trout into his net” (22). Marian is aware of the ad’s manipulation of its consumers: she realizes men will buy Moose Beer out of a desire to support the ultra-masculine “real man” concept of gender identity. This ad’s assumption of a “real” masculine identity is itself a performance, like Ainsley’s performance of femininity. As with Ainsley, Marian’s ironic comments about the ad and the men it attracts highlight the performativity of Moose Beer-created masculinity, and question the naturalness of gender identity.

Atwood uses the Moose Beer advertisement, along with other media images, to emphasize the construction of masculine gender norms. This is most clear in her description of Marian’s fiancé, Peter. She describes Peter in terms of images: she calls him “ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette

ads” (61). He takes showers constantly, and so always smells of soap. Later, when she insults him, she notes that her remark “put him in the class of the people in the deodorant ads” (83). Even his apartment is an image. It is used occasionally as a showroom for prospective renters, being the only finished apartment in the building. Marian describes it as “sparse,” the furniture “spindly and isolated” in the large empty living room (58). Peter has several hobbies, all of which are stereotypically masculine ones: hunting, model building, and—interestingly—photography. Not only does Peter live in an image of an apartment, measure himself by advertising images, but he also likes to capture images of his own. Peter, then, is a construction made from a series of images.

Atwood uses Marian to highlight this fact through her ironic commentary.

Marian is reassured when she can identify the images or quotations that Peter adopts as part of his personality. For her, it is an especially easy way to figure him out. As it was, early on in their relationship, Marian and Peter “had been taking each other at our face values, which meant we had got on very well” (61). Once Marian can identify Peter’s surface personality, she feels that is enough to understand him. She does this first when trying to figure out why Peter chose to have sex with her in his bathtub. She understands Peter is currently upset over the news of his best friend Trigger’s recent engagement, who is the last of his friends to be married. When Peter found out, he was distraught. Marian, again with ironic detachment, remembers that his friends’ marriages.

had been like an epidemic. Just before I’d met him two had succumbed, and in the four months since that another two had gone under without much warning. [. . .] He and Trigger had clutched each other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of

himself that he needed. Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty. (22-23)

Marian's tongue-in-cheek description of Peter's overdramatic and response to his friend's marriages shows Peter's ridiculous views on how to be a real man, and emphasizes how hard Peter works to construct his perfect masculine image—Marian is quite aware that he does not want a woman to mess up his masculine image, as he believes has happened with all of his friends and their wives. However, even though Peter fears marriage (and a woman's influence) will destroy his masculine image, he is also aware a woman is necessary as part of his image, but fears making Marian a key or influential part.

After having sex in his bathtub, Marian speculates further with ironic wit as to how Peter got the idea for using the bathtub. She remembers the past two marriage traumas Peter has survived with her: one on the sheepskin rug in his apartment, and another on “a scratchy blanket in a field we'd driven four hours to get to, and where I was made uneasy by thoughts of farmers and cows. [. . .] He had worn a plaid [hunting] jacket” (60). She tries to find the image that Peter imitates to have these sexual fantasies, “but I could never locate the quotations” (60). The fact that she attempts to find these images shows her work in deconstructing Peter's masculinity and highlighting its instability. She guesses that the sheepskin rug was an image from a men's magazine, and the field from a hunting magazine, but is unsure about the bathtub. She supposes it could be an image Peter found on the cover of one of his murder mysteries, a kind of “escape literature” (60) for him—which frightens her, since she believes it was an image of a dead woman, murdered in the bathtub. This image—and Marian's concern about it—foreshadow her future suspicions about Peter. This image connection, between a dead

woman and Marian, is the first time Marian feels that she is just an object to Peter—she is nothing more than a body to fulfill his masculine image construction. At the end of this scene, Marian fears Peter's real reason for sex in the bathtub—because he sees Marian as nothing more than another bathroom fixture. This scene begins Marian's novel-length struggle against becoming only a fixture—an object—to Peter's masculine image.

Peter's careful construction of images to create his personality is a gender performance that supports masculine gender norms within the strict regulatory framework of gender. Peter cites discourse continually to create the illusion of a stable, fixed masculine gender. For instance, Peter uses the patriarchal discursive assumptions inherent in his hunting magazines to construct his personality as an occasional hunter. He collects a variety of knives and rifles to display in his apartment to show off his interest in hunting, as well as gets a thrill out of telling graphic hunting stories of him and his friends. He cites these assumptions to support discourse on hunters, and through this supports masculine gender norms as well, since hunting is an appropriate interest for the masculine-gendered. Without Marian's comments, Peter would be the perfect masculine image, supporting the notion that gender is a fixed identity. However, Atwood uses Marian and her ironic comments to expose the absurdity and falsity of Peter's identity. Even though Marian herself does not realize what she is doing, her ability to identify the advertisements that construct Peter's personality and image work to emphasize the falsity of the masculine gender.

III: Subverting Gender in *The Edible Woman*

Marian's Subversive Body in *The Edible Woman*

Duncan interprets Marian's eating disorder as a rebellious action, which has also become a common critical interpretation of the text as well. Atwood critic Karen Stein describes Marian as "enacting her resistance to the traditional female romance plot with her body" (160). T. D. MacLulich names Marian's eating disorder as both a "reaction" and "behavior," something controlled by her mind, as well as a "cry for attention . . . [she is] asserting her autonomous existence" (192). MacLulich's discussion of her disorder implies that Marian is the one doing the action, describing it as a "rejection of her own body" (190). J. Brooks Bouson also agrees, labeling Marian's disorder as "self-starvation," which "reflects her resistance to the cultural constructions of femininity" (*Brutal Choreographies* 25). In each of these criticisms, Marian is the aggressor, actively and consciously defying the society around her through her eating disorder. Similarly, Elspeth Cameron names Marian's disorder as "self-imposed," and discusses her problem as entirely psychosomatic, with no mention of what her body may be doing (52). These critics describe Marian as the subject, enacting her resistance on the objects of her body and society. I wish to go further in this analysis—rather than simply naming her disorder as a conscious and defiant choice, I want to complicate it by placing it in the discourse-body-identity model I presented earlier. By looking at the bodily acts of the character, and the ways in which discourse is disrupted on the visible space of the body, one can see how integral the body is to the creation and reformulation of gender identity.

In my model, the body is the mediating influence between discourse and identity. The body, through its ability to disrupt gender norms, can be interpreted as reaffirming or

complicating discursive assumptions about gender. The body must re-cite these assumptions in order to either support or subvert them. Because of the constant need for re-citation through the body, the body plays an integral role in the creation of identity. This opens up new possibilities for the subversion of discourse. The body may act and re-cite discourse to create an identity that supports gender norms. Alternatively, the body may re-cite discourse to call into question the supposed stability of identity. Either way, the disruptive force of the body has the power to control both the interpretation of discourse and the creation of identity.

Disease is one way the body may act and re-cite the prevailing assumptions of gender identity. Patriarchal notions of discourse imply that gender is fixed and unchanging. Disease, however, complicates this notion. Through the diseased body, the body is able to re-cite the assumptions and call the fixity of gender identity into question. As in the earlier example of Rennie's cancer in *Bodily Harm*, the traumatic fragmenting and unstable identity the diseased body constructs undermines the concept of a fixed identity and in turn highlights the construction of gender norms. Since the body is a central figure to the interpretation of discourse and the creation of identity, the bodily act of disease is a powerful subversive option. The diseased body highlights the flaws in the discourse of gender as something unchangeable. Through the trauma of the experience of disease, the diseased body "infects" identity and discourse, calling its naturalness into question and exposing its construction. In Marian's case, she develops an eating disorder, finding that her body rejects certain kinds of foods. It is important to note that it is Marian's body, and not Marian herself, that enacts the disease. Marian's body has split from her mind, alienating herself from her body. Marian describes her body as the one

doing the refusing of food, calling her problem “this refusal of her mouth to eat” (166) and notes that one morning, looking at her breakfast egg “she found her mouth closing together like a frightened sea-anemone. It’s living; it’s alive, the muscles in her throat said, and tightened. She pushed the dish away. Her conscious mind was used to the procedure by now” (174). Instead of Marian’s brain thinking a refusal of the food, it is her mouth and her throat muscles that “speak” instead, showing the power the diseased body has over the mind. Rather than thinking of her disorder as psychosomatic or even a conscious defiant choice, Atwood imagines the disease as instigated by the body rather than by the mind. This control by the body in itself questions not only the notion of gender identity but identity as a whole. The idea that disease can happen unmotivated and at random threatens basic ideas of identity stability. For Marian, the disease threatens to supplant her notion of a stable identity with one that is fragmented, causing her to question the constructed nature of identity.

One way disease questions identity is through the collapsing of bodily boundaries. Originally, Marian is satisfied only with surfaces. She has created and maintained strict boundaries between her self and not-self. Throughout the novel, Marian refuses to look too deeply into anything: she is satisfied with her relationship with Peter, saying, “we had been taking each other at our face values” (61). Once her body becomes diseased, the identity-questioning that is forced upon her causes those boundaries to collapse. The discourses of self and other collapse in on one another, frightening Marian and forcing her to explore the abject depths of her identity in order to abolish them and establish body boundaries once more (although this may be only a temporary re-establishment, marking the time between one collapsing of boundaries and another).

Abjection as Subversive Bodily Act in *The Edible Woman*

The collapsing of body boundaries that occur during Marian's eating disorder point to the power of the abject, a term Julia Kristeva works with to explain how bodies are continuously re-constructed. In Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror*, she explains that the abject is opposed to the subject, but it is not an object either. It is a place where meaning breaks down, it is "'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" (4). Abjection is a method to protect oneself against the horror of reality that, "if I acknowledge it, [it] annihilates me" (4). The importance of abjection is that it is constructed as a safety device, used to reinforce the boundary between self and other. In general, abjection is the effect of things that disturb systems and orders, of things that focus on the ambiguous, that do not respect borders or rules (4). Since abjection causes this blurring of body boundaries, it encourages the re-establishment of boundaries. If one knows what is contained by one's body and what is external (and thus polluting) to it, then this signals that a boundary between what is human and what is not human has been clearly drawn. Without the threat of the abject, which threatens to collapse those boundaries, the distinction between human and non-human could not be drawn. Abjection, then, motivates the attempted establishing of clear boundaries between self and other through its contestation of those same boundaries.

Marian's eating disorder can be interpreted as motivated by abjection. Kristeva names repulsion by food as "perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2). When food is abjected, the person recognizes and constructs the threat of food in order to try to re-establish the boundaries that mark it as outside the body. Food can be abject when it is interpreted as interfering between, or blurring, the boundaries of

human and non-human. When food questions these borders, it becomes a polluting object similar to excrement, another site of abjection that interferes between the social and the organic, the human being and other (75). Through the food's blurring of body boundaries, it encourages the re-establishment of those boundaries in order to safely demarcate what is part of the body and what is alien to it. Marian's eating disorder causes her to recognize and experience the loss of her bodily boundaries in order to re-establish them. When Marian abjects food and sees it as having human characteristics, the food questions what is part of a body and what is outside of it. She is then forced to acknowledge the abject (and body-like) nature of the food in order to re-establish the differences between it and her own body. Once the boundaries are re-established, the food is safely and clearly non-human, and is identified as differing from a human body. This process of blurring and re-establishing boundaries demonstrates the constructed nature of identity. Abjection, therefore, is another way in which the body can be interpreted as subverting discourse and gender norms, and emphasizing gender's construction.

In the novel, Marian explores her abject self through abjecting the food on her plate. Once content with surfaces, Marian is forced to look at her food with a new perspective, one that blurs the distinction between living and non-living. The first—and most graphic—time this occurs is during a dinner with her fiancé, Peter. This scene occurs several weeks after their engagement, and Marian notes that, “she had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her. It got rid of the vacillation she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away” (159). Previously, Marian has allowed Peter to take her voice and choose for her. She has acted like the

“proper” fiancée of the 1960s—passive and submissive. This passivity supports gender norms as well as creates the illusion of their stability. Once disease enters the plot, however, these illusions are shattered. Marian now suddenly feels her body’s rejection of food and perceives food in a new way:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarket they had it all pre-packaged in cellophane [. . .]. But now it was suddenly there in front of her with no intervening paper, it was flesh and blood, rare, and she had been devouring it. Gorging herself on it. (164)

Marian is now able to see beyond the surface of the meat, and beyond its protective cellophane packaging. Because Marian perceives the steak as “flesh and blood”—as body-like or human-like—Marian’s sense of what is part of her body and what is separate from it has been destroyed. She now cannot distinguish the steak—her dinner—from her own human body. Because of this confusion, she must construct the steak as an abject threat to her body in order to distinguish it from herself again. Because the steak acts as a threat to Marian’s body boundaries, the food—and her resulting abjection of it—work to undercut the presumed stability of identity.

In this scene, the steak contests the boundary between living and non-living: Marian sees the steak as a muscle, once belonging to a living cow, which causes her to question its current use as food. When wrapped in cellophane and sanitized, Marian never

looked beyond the surface of the food and was able to draw distinct boundaries between human and non-human things. Now, through her body's disease, Marian becomes aware of the contested boundaries of bodies through identifying food as a kind of "body." For this reason, it makes sense that the first things she cannot eat are the ones that resemble bodies: things "too obviously cut" from a cow, pig or sheep disgust her (165). Ground meats (which look less body-like) such as hot dogs and sausages are edible to Marian, "as long as she didn't look at them too closely" (165). She is also disgusted by the skeleton that comes with chicken, and fears that its skin would too closely resemble goose bumps on a human arm. "Whatever it was that had been making these decisions, not her mind certainly, rejected anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre" (165). This makes it clear that her body is forcing Marian to abject the food, as her body has already blurred the boundaries between her self and other. She links these meats with human characteristics, an interfering of the abject between the once-distinct boundaries of living subjects and food objects.

There is a clear parallel here between the packaging of food and the "packaging", or presentation, of femininity. Meat is packaged in order to contain it, as well as to construct its perfection. If meat is unwrapped, the package's construction is evident, as the exposed meat is raw, unsanitized and far from perfect. In the same way, female bodies are packaged by femininity. On the outside, femininity constructs a perfect, controlled image of woman. Beneath the packaged surface of femininity lies the female, abject and "raw" in its imperfection, which also evidences gender identity's construction.

Marian's eating disorder and the forced abjection of food emphasizes the power the body has over identity. It is clear the body has influence over the creation of a

coherent and controlled identity, since every time Marian's body acts up—whether through disease or behavior—Marian questions the stability of her identity, as well as the identities of others. For example, at the moment her eating disorder begins, Marian not only begins to question her sanity, but also begins to see Peter as malevolent, cutting his steak with expert precision in a surgical but also violent way (162). Since her disease causes her identity to fragment and blur the boundaries between self and other, Marian is traumatized by the confusing experience, leading her to question the possible construction of her identity. Atwood critic Mary Catherine Rainwater notes that it is a fragmented sense of one's own identity that leads to a fear of unexpected traits in others (18). Marian does this in the novel, suspecting Peter of dangerous hidden identities. While Marian usually sees Peter as stable and safe, as she begins to explore the abject depths of her identity, she does the same with his as well, revealing what she feels are the hidden layers of his identity. At the same time Marian sees Peter as her future husband, she also notices parts of his identity that frighten her. Before Peter proposes to Marian, she describes him in the light of the storm: "I turned and saw him watching me, his face strangely shadowed, his eyes gleaming like an animal's in the beam from a car headlight. His stare was intent, faintly ominous" (85). She notices predatory instincts in Peter—and fears she is his prey. She is scared when she notices the surprisingly violent action required for Peter to cut his steak—skillful yet violent: "violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her" (162). These visualizations frighten Marian, and cause her to suspect Peter of having a dangerous secret identity. This act (the disease) is so powerfully subversive that it not only questions the stability of Marian's identity, but also the identities of others around her.

Mimesis and Bodily Subversion in *The Edible Woman*

Towards the end of the novel, Marian's body questions gender norms through mimesis. Mimesis, a classical term used and redeveloped by Luce Irigaray for its subversive potential, refers to the method by which a woman purposely performs as feminine—a set of acts assigned to her by the masculine discursive system—in order to discover the ways in which that discourse oppresses her (220). Irigaray finds it is most powerful to subvert the system from within, by obeying the rules of gender norms in order to uncover its construction (76). Irigaray elaborates: To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing her to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself, [. . .] in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.

Mimesis itself is a re-citation of acts, a performance of the body that otherwise supports gender norms, the repetition of which highlights the source of woman's exploitation in discourse. In my model, mimesis is a subversive bodily act, which, like abjection and disease, uses discursive assumptions to call into question the stability of identity as well as discourse. Mimesis specifically questions gender norms as well through its conscious performance of them. Similar to Butler's theory of gender performativity, mimesis is not a conscious act. While mimesis is “taken on” by a subject, it is not done by choice. Like performativity, the content of the mimicry is controlled by the patriarchal regulatory ideal of gender norms. In this way, mimesis is a potentially subversive bodily act, questioning the system while also participating in it. While

obeying the regulatory ideal of gender norms, the act of mimesis deconstructs gender identity as something unnatural by emphasizing its performativity.

Mimesis occurs at a specific point in the text, a point when the protagonist feels the greatest pressure from the regulatory ideal. Marian enacts mimesis in the novel when she is getting ready for her and Peter's party. Peter wants to show her off to his friends, and so invites everyone (excluding Marian's friends) to his apartment for an evening. He asks Marian to dress up and get her hair done, things that she does not normally do. It is not her choice to perform femininity for this party, but she does so in order to please her fiancé. However, through this assumption of her gender role, Marian begins to perceive herself differently. Inadvertently, Marian mimics femininity and subverts masculine discourse through uncovering the mechanics by which she is exploited.

This kind of mimetic performance is much different from the performance of femininity Ainsley enacted, discussed in Chapter 1. Ainsley's performance was not mimetic—while it exposed gender construction to the reader, Ainsley never discovered the source of her exploitation through her performance. Marian's performance is mimetic precisely because she does end up viewing it as a path to discovery, along with the reader.

To mimic her prescribed gender role appropriately, Marian enlists the help of experts—salesladies, hairdressers, and makeup artists—to make her into the perfect image of femininity Peter has been working so hard to mold her into. The very fact that Marian is unable to “be” feminine naturally and relies on the advice of others emphasizes gender construction. First, she buys a dress according to Peter's wishes, one that is, in his words, “‘not quite so mousy’ as any she already owned” (228). This dress, short, red, and

sequined, is very unlike Marian's casual style. Even so, she trusts the words of the saleslady: "It's you, dear" (228). This comment is especially ironic, as it assumes the naturalness of gender. By saying the dress *is* Marian, the statement assumes Marian is her gender and considers femininity to be natural and innate in her. However, the fact that it is not Marian—and not Marian's style, either—shows the way in which discourse constructs feminine gender identity: by assuming it is innate.

Atwood shows the fallacy of "natural" gender by describing Marian's visit to the hairdresser's as a medical procedure. She notes that the secretary "was disturbingly nurse-like and efficient" (229). She sits on an "operating-table," and wished that "they would give anesthetics to the patients" (229). She lets the "doctor" "operate" on her hair, and allows the "nurses" to lead her around. Marian is not satisfied with her hair, believing it makes her look like a prostitute. She thinks of her co-worker Lucy, who recommended the stylist, and Lucy's hair, which "blended into her, became part of her" (229). Lucy, in Marian's mind, seems to capture the "natural" feminine look. In contrast, Marian feels somehow false, in her attempt to dress "naturally" like Lucy: "Marian had always thought that on her own body [nail polish, makeup, and elaborate hairstyles] looked extra, stuck to her surface like patches or posters" (229). The fact that this supposed "natural" feminine image not only does not fit Marian (and sticks to her surface only) shows its elaborate construction.

Not only does Marian's hair need to be constructed (or "operated on") to appear natural, so does her face. Later on, she lets Ainsley do her makeup and nails for her, because she knows, as Ainsley says, "you'd just do it in your usual skimpy way and come out looking like a kid playing dress-up in her mother's clothes" (243). This comment

testifies to the presumed “natural” look of femininity, and the fact that Marian cannot achieve it without other’s help shows gender identity not to be innate. As with the hairdresser’s, Marian describes this process as a “procedure,” where “strange things were being done to her skin, then to each eye and each eyebrow” (244). Once finished, her face seems unrecognizable to her, but is appreciative of Ainsley’s trouble nonetheless. Ainsley even gives Marian tips on how to smile correctly with false eyelashes, and Marian practices in the mirror: “Marian was embarrassed: she didn’t know how [to smile]. She was experimenting, looking in the mirror, trying to find out which particular set of muscles would produce the desired effect, [. . . Marian had eventually] succeeded in getting an approximate droop that still however had a suggestion of squint in it” (244). The fact that Marian needs to practice being feminine exposes gender identity as unnatural. The medical way Marian describes her experience (and especially the fact that Marian cannot come by it naturally) clearly point out the construction of gender.

Marian’s mimesis also emphasizes gender’s construction through her passive behaviors. During this time, Marian is disturbed by her behavior. The moment she enters the hairdresser’s, she immediately feels passive. During the procedure she acts as a passive object, and for the first time is bothered by her passive actions. She notes, “She didn’t enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an object” (229). While the doctor and nurses are doing things to her hair, she finds that “her whole body felt curiously paralyzed” (230). Observing other women under the hair dryers, she thinks, “inert, totally inert. Was this what she was being pushed towards, this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical? An electric mushroom” (230). Afterwards, she believes hairdressers “never did what you wanted them to. They treated your head like a cake: something to be

iced and ornamented” (229). The fact that Marian is now uncomfortable with passivity (even though she has tended to be passive throughout the novel) is the result of a disruption. By feeling uncomfortable and awkward in her assumed “natural” gender emphasizes the very unnaturalness of it, and calls gender norms into question.

Marian explores her discomfort with her passive feminine role at the party. During the party, Marian is pleased with herself, happy that the party is going well and that she is behaving properly. Attempting to be content with her identity, she believes that she is also content with Peter’s identity as well. As she drinks her scotch, she observes Peter taking pictures (his hobby) and is content with him. After fearing the worst earlier, she feels she has finally found his true identity: “So that’s what was in there all the time, she thought happily: this is what he’s turning into. The real Peter, the one underneath, was nothing surprising or frightening, only this bungalow-and-double-bed man, this charcoal-cooking-in-the-backyard man. This home-movie man” (267). She imagines their life together in the future, full of reassuring images of Peter: pot-bellied and balding, wearing jeans in his workshop, barbecuing in the backyard. Suddenly, she finds she is unable to see herself in the picture, and is uneasy—“the discovery chilled her” (267). Her Peter-image then changes, and has a meat cleaver in its hand. Marian begins to feel that this passive feminine role, forced on her by society, may become dangerous to her—she fears that Peter may use her passivity as a way to control and destroy her. With this thought, she then feels out of place at the party, wishing she would not be passive: “who was that tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space” (268). Marian is in a panic, and feels “there had to be something more,” meaning that she might

be thinking incorrectly—perhaps there was a further explanation for her discomfort. When she finds the real Peter at the party, he has his camera pointed at her, aiming to take her picture, but Marian sees where her fears have originated: from the camera, a machine that freezes a woman into a passive image—permanently. Marian feels that “once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (269). Instead of fearing only the camera, she is scared of Peter: “That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by the other layers, waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands” (270). She once again fears the true identity of the man behind the camera and feels he must be trying to hurt her. She realizes she must get out of the party, and does so; slipping out while everyone else is stopped to pose for a group picture.

What this scene demonstrates is that through performing an accepted version of femininity, one is able to subvert the discourse of gender norms within its own system. Like Ainsley’s performance at dinner, Marian’s performance also highlights the constructedness of gender and allows the readers to question its stability. The important difference here is that Marian’s performance allows her insight on her situation—along with the readers, Marian also is caused to question the stability of her identity. The effects of Marian’s mimicry allow her to discover the source of her exploitation: the image. Now that she knows her enemy, she understands how she is able to subvert the masculine discursive system. Of course, Marian believes Peter is the one to be blamed, rather than the camera he owns or the images he consumes. She equates Peter with the image-obsessed culture he lives in, and fears he will track her down and force her into a

permanent image. As discussed in Chapter One, Marian sees Peter as an image in everything he is and does, and cannot separate him from the images that are exploiting her. She sees him as a person in a cigarette ad, and his apartment as a series of images from men's magazines. What she does not realize is that she does not need to get rid of Peter or his camera to solve her problem.

Marian's misinterpretation of her own danger is key to understanding her struggle. Her real problem, as implied by the text through her constant struggles, lies in her misguided assumption that there is a "true" identity that one has. Because she is so wrapped up in trying to discover Peter's "real" identity, she ignores the possibility other factors may play in her oppression. The majority of her struggle comes from working through the possibility that identities are merely constructions, which is the discovery resulting from bodily subversion (and which frightens her). Even though Marian never accepts the concept of identity as a construction, the text constantly plays with this idea through the experiences of gender performativity, disease, and abjection.

Even though Marian refuses to notice how her actions disrupt normative ideas of gender, Atwood's novel continues to play with the concept through the baking of the woman-cake. The "cake scene," as it is called in Atwood criticism, is by far the most debated—and baffling—scene in the entire novel. Some critics seek Atwood's goal in this scene, others point out its inconsistencies, and others analyze its confusing quasi-symbolism. In the scene, Marian plans to create a test for Peter, so "she could know what was real" (295)—that is, so Marian can find out if Peter was really trying to consume her, as she has feared. She does not want to have a discussion with Peter, because she knows the way words can be manipulated, and is aware of the trickery words can create within

masculine discourse through her experience with Duncan. Words can form identity, just as they have been able to create her gender identity all this time. Marian decides that the safest way to subvert discourse and find a truthful answer is through symbolic mimesis—through baking a cake in the shape of her own image. She will re-cite her own image; the cake will be dressed exactly as she was for the party. Finally, she will offer her cake-woman to Peter: if he accepts, she thinks, he will consume the cake-woman and forget Marian. This re-citation of discourse is a bodily disruption. Instead of performing gender herself as Marian did at the party, she creates a “body” and forces it to perform her gender identity. The interesting point about this action is not only does Marian construct a mimetic self, she creates it as she has been created—within the strict regulatory framework of gender norms. Marian now enacts her gender oppression as an agent of the regulatory ideal on a symbolic self, a self that is quite appropriately in the form of food.

Throughout the scene in which Marian bakes and decorates the cake-woman, the way Atwood describes Marian’s process highlights the absurd constructedness of gender identity. Furthermore, as Marian re-cites herself as an image, she demonstrates what she has learned from her discovery through mimesis earlier. Through mimetic rupture, she found the ways in which she was being exploited by discourse. Now, as she is re-citing her image, she uses what she has learned from the discursive system (the regulatory framework of gender norms), but now re-citing it to fit her needs and question the stability of the entire system. Just as the hairdresser/doctor “operated” on Marian, Marian now “operates” on the cake-woman (297). The morning after Peter’s proposal, Marian described her head as feeling “as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe and left me only the rind to think with” (86). Here, Marian

creates the cake-woman's head by "scoop[ing]" it out (297). At the hairdresser's, she felt her head had been "treated like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (229) into an elaborate hairstyle, she now describes the "intricate baroque scrolls and swirls" (298) she creates with icing for the cake-woman's hair. As Marian has been shaped and manipulated into an image, she now knows how to shape and manipulate an image of her own. The ease with which Marian does this plays with the concept of "natural" gender—instead of showing gender to be natural, this scene shows gender construction to be natural instead, and ironic twist fitting to the novel.

Peter, however, disappoints Marian by refusing to accept her cake-woman. Marian expects Peter to eat the cake, as it is a sacrificial offering to him, and as a result Peter will stop destroying Marian. What Marian does not realize is that the symbol was never meant for him—it was for her. The action of creating and manipulating her cake-self is more effective for Marian, as it results in disrupting gender norms. Because of this, the cake has nothing to do with Peter, and is meant instead as a way for Marian to see and enact the process by which she is manipulated. Looking at the cake after Peter's hasty exit, Marian thinks, "as a symbol it had definitely failed. It looked up at her with its silvery eyes, enigmatic, mocking, succulent. Suddenly she was hungry" (300). But the symbol did not fail—Marian now eats the cake-woman, which is the first thing she has eaten for some time. It is significant that the cake ends up providing the truth Marian so desperately wants—in an unexpected way. Expecting the cake would reveal the truth about Peter's manipulation of Marian, she is confused and considers the cake a failure when it does not affect him. The cake, however, ended up succeeding in revealing the truth of Marian's problem—as it exposed Marian's image, not Peter, as the one who was

trying to hurt her. At the end of this scene, Marian ironically consumes the very object that had previously been trying to consume her: “Not bad, she thought critically; needs a touch more lemon though” (300).

Marian insists twice in this scene that her cake-woman is not a symbol, but “only a cake” (300). It may be a cake, but it is also a significant piece of food, primarily because of its woman shape. It is foreshadowed in a previous scene, when Marian gives Peter a store-bought cake for Valentine’s Day: “It was a heart with pink icing and probably stale, but it was the shape that mattered” (226). Here, the woman shape is what matters most to this cake as well. It may only be a cake on the inside, but it is the shape of it that gives it its power. Because the cake is in the shape of a woman, it functions as a clear symbol of Marian’s feminine image, and its creation highlights the almost “natural” construction of gender identity. The fact that Marian does not, or is not willing to, see the cake in this way does not overshadow its importance in the text. If anything, the fact that Marian calls the symbol “only a cake” emphasizes to the reader that it is, indeed, much more than a cake.

By consuming her cake-image and thereby incorporating and destroying it, Marian reassures herself that she will not be reduced to an image, which she equates with losing her identity, something she still holds on to as representative of her true self. To be reduced to an image is like death for Marian. Peter, she realizes, is already an image.

While eating the cake, she thinks of him:

She could see him in her mind, posed jauntily in the foreground of an elegant salon with chandeliers and draperies, impeccably dressed, a glass of scotch in one hand; his foot was on the head of a stuffed lion and he had

an eye patch over one eye. Beneath one arm was strapped a revolver.

Around the margin was an edging of gold scrollwork and slightly above Peter's left ear was a thumbtack. She licked her fork meditatively. He would definitely succeed. (300)

Throughout the novel, Marian saw Peter as a set of images, and believes he will “succeed”—indeed, he already has—in constructing himself as an image. Now, the only way she will remember him is as a photograph, tacked to a wall. The clear absurdity of this image only serves to underscore its own construction. Peter, she believes, has successfully constructed his identity through quoting images. Marian sees the adoption of a constructed identity as ridiculous and is unwilling to see herself as a construction as well, even though her body's ruptures have questioned it all along. Satisfied with her actions, she eats the body of the cake, “plung[ing] her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head” (301).

As a result of this scene, Marian cures her eating disorder and breaks her engagement with Peter. On her own, Marian begins cleaning up her apartment, which has accumulated piles of dirty dishes and trash throughout the novel. However, for as hard as she works to clean up the place, she can never get it completely clean. Organizing the refrigerator, Marian “did not examine closely the horrors that had accumulated inside it” (306). Washing the windows, “it bothered me that there was still some dirt on the outside I couldn't reach” (307). Not only is it significant that the dirt began to pile up at the time Marian's bodily disruptions began taking over, but it is also important that the dirt cannot be cleaned up. This indicates the permanent—if small—effects of rupture. If the dirt in her apartment is read as the residue left over from her bodily disruptions, then the messes

that cannot be destroyed are the permanent effects of subversion. Even though Marian considers herself back to normal by the end and refuses to participate in any more subversion, the dirt is symbolically there to remind her of the “horrors” she has seen. Even if she does not realize it, the dirt signifies that her perspective on patriarchal discursive assumptions has changed through her experience—its effects (residue) are there for good.

The residual dirt brings hope to an otherwise unsatisfying and ambiguous ending. In the last line of the novel, Atwood leaves us with a twist. It is significant that the last line of the novel is given to Duncan, commenting on the leftovers of Marian’s cake-woman: “Thank you, [. . .] it was delicious” (310). Previously, Marian seems to have succeeded in subverting discourse and consuming her destructive image. Here, she has changed back into her old, passive ways, allowing Duncan to consume the leftover half of her cake-woman (the head, significantly) as well as the last line of the book. Why does Marian revert to her old self? Since Marian’s body is not a problem for her anymore—her body has stopped asserting itself through disease—Marian is not motivated to look too closely at herself and her situation. Giving this last line to Duncan also opens up the possibility that later on, Marian’s problems could resurface. So while Marian does understand how to successfully subvert the discursive system and call into question the stability of gender identity, she prefers avoiding it. She would rather be like other “normal” women of the 1960s. In what is perhaps the biggest ironic twist of the novel, Atwood makes the subversive protagonist ignore her power and return to her old ways, ways that got her into this situation in the first place.

Through bodily ruptures such as disease, abjection, and mimesis, Atwood not only highlights the construction of gender, but also gives her character lenses with which to examine the stability of identity. This frightens her, but despite her fear, Marian wills herself to follow her defiant body into disruption and does successfully subvert and question discourse and identity through mimesis. Through symbolic mimesis, she re-cites discourse to construct her own image of femininity. Marian begins to destroy her image herself, but does so only in part, as she allows Duncan to eat the rest of it. Once her body is back to “normal,” she refuses to defy discourse any more, and accepts her passive role once again, leaving the reader unsatisfied as to a clear conclusion.

Language plays an integral role in understanding the cake scene. Each character responds to the cake differently, trying to pin it down to a specific symbolic meaning. Marian, as discussed earlier, reads it as alive: “Her creation gazed up at her, its face doll-like and vacant except for the small silver glitter of intelligence in each green eye” (298). Later in the scene, Marian names the cake as “monumental silliness” (298), a failure (300) and “only a cake” (301). Ainsley is shocked to see her eating the cake-woman and calls Marian’s behavior as “rejecting [her] femininity” (301). Peter is speechless, unable to put his interpretation into words: “[Peter and Marian] didn’t have much of a conversation after all” (300). Duncan, while devouring its leftovers, does not even register that he recognizes the cake’s significant shape: “the cake was absorbed without exclamations of pleasure, even without noticeable expression” (310). Paying attention to the characters in the scene, the cake simultaneously has multiple meanings and no meaning. This problem of the cake’s interpretation, which has caused many critics trouble, may best be explored through the complexity language offers the text. In the next

chapter, as I will argue, the woman-cake is a symbol that exists beyond language. This cake-body, like human bodies, exists in a realm both within and outside of language, a complex dual position that makes language an inadequate method of interpreting bodies. To conclude this study, I will explore the complexities language offers interpretations of bodies and bodily disruptions within my model of the bodily-mediated discursive system.

Conclusion

The protagonist of the novel, Marian seems to be back to her old, passive self, unaware of the disruptions she has done. The ending is quite ambiguous and refuses a clear interpretation. In a sense, it is not willing to be reduced to language. However, there is a non-verbal sign located within the last chapter that proves the success of these ruptures. The dirt in Marian's apartment—dirty clothes, moldy dishes, the hidden “horrors” at the back of the fridge, as well as the dirt on the outside of the window—can all be read as the residue from bodily disruption. The dirt began accumulating midway through Part Two of the novel, at the same time her eating disorder commenced and bodily ruptures began. The fact that excess is produced by Marian's bodily subversions shows the linguistic inexpressibility of the body. Butler supports this, saying that “there is always a dimension of bodily life that cannot be fully represented, even as it works as the condition and activating condition of language” (*Undoing*, 198-99). No matter how much language attempts to contain the body, there is still a part that cannot be expressed within language. Marian herself notes that during her disease, she is unable to express her problem in language: there is no name to express what she has, and thus no way for her to understand it. Along with the woman-cake, this dirt proves that the body exceeds language and goes outside of its limits. Both of these things are not able to be articulated through language, and exist outside of it in the form of inexpressible residue.

How can this bit of dirt be interpreted as a kind of bodily “excess”? In *Undoing Gender*, Butler says, “language emerges from the body, constituting an emission of sorts” (198). Language, therefore, is a form of bodily excess, since while existing within discourse, the body also precedes it and “gives rise to language” (199). To add to Butler's

theory, language is not the only type of bodily excess. Because of the limits of language I have mentioned earlier, there remains another kind of bodily production outside the limits of language, and this is that dirt in Marian's apartment.

Marian is unable to get rid of all the dirt in her apartment. As hard as she tries, there is still dirt on the outside of the window that she cannot reach. Not only is this excess evidence of the body's rupture of discourse outside of language, but this dirt attests to the force which bodily subversion has, as well as the power it has by existing outside of language. The fact that Marian will always have that little bit of dirt on her window shows that a rupture has occurred: even though she may act the same and be in the same situation as in the beginning, the bodily disruptions that happened in the middle of the book and the constructs it exposed will always linger. This dirt will never disappear precisely because it is unable to be represented by language. Since the dirt cannot be limited to linguistic definition, it can never be dismissed and will forever hang on to Marian.

Why is bodily excess necessary? The body exceeds the linguistic system for a reason: language has the potential to limit and misrepresent. Marian can never be certain Duncan is not lying to her. In the same way, Marian is also never sure Peter is not manipulating her thoughts through his language. Because language is problematic, the fact that the body is both within and outside of discourse gives the body a kind of freedom to go beyond the limits of language. The body is able to interpret gender norms in a new way because, existing beyond language, it is not limited by language. This freedom is evidence in the bodily excess it leaves behind. Excess is the leftover evidence of the parts of the body that resist definition by language. Excess occurs often in

communication, according to Butler. There is always a meaning conveyed by one's body that does not quite match the conscious, linguistic meaning of one's speech: bodily acts can never be fully represented by language, and thus produce excess by "exceed[ing] the intentions of the subject" (199).

Therefore, the body is the most likely method for successful disruption because of its existence outside of language. The body uses language in order to expose language's failure to express. Despite the fact that the body is a construct within discourse and is constituted by language, it exists prior to and beyond linguistic description. Because of its existence outside of language, it is freed from the limitations of language and is better able to subvert discourse to question gender. Bodily acts, because they are free from the complications language poses, are unconcerned with the rigid definitions and interpretations language implements upon itself. Paradoxically, language limits itself, thus containing its subversive potential. Because the body is free from these limits, it is the more powerful and successful method by which to subvert patriarchal assumptions of gender norms. In this text, Atwood demonstrates this disruptive power of the female body. Taking an otherwise predictable plot, stock characters, and allowing bodily ruptures to occur among them, Atwood produces a text which is complex and theoretically dense. Atwood's bodily disruptions serve to not only emphasize the construction of gender, but also to show the effectiveness of the body as a subversive space as it exceeds language.

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