Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and the Commercialization of Literary Scholarship

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Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) is most often viewed as a novel that critiques consumer society in general and, in so doing, examines the life of one consumer, Marian McAlpin, in particular. What the existing criticism overlooks is another of Atwood's central concerns in this novel: the state of literary scholarship. Indeed, *The Edible Woman* offers an important examination of the commercialization of academic endeavours and the resultant corruption of scholarly values: that is, through the character of Duncan, a jaded English graduate student, Atwood explores the shift among literary scholars from the idealistic pursuit of knowledge for its own sake to the self-interested pursuit of individual rewards, reputation, and career advancement. As one study of Canadian higher education puts it, scholars are "the purveyors of knowledge for knowledge's sake, but especially in the latter half of the twentieth-century, tangible results of research are most prized" (Stortz and Panayotidis 14). This alignment of academe with commercial interests is the basis of an ongoing debate: Jean-François Lyotard, Deborah L. Rhode, George Ritzer, and Theodore Roszak are a few of the many scholars who have highlighted the increasing commodification of academic endeavours, while others such as Warren Hagstrom and Lewis Hyde argue that the aims and intents of academe are antithetical to those of a market-driven capitalist economy. Atwood's debut novel, with its focus on literary scholarship, employs the alternative medium of fiction to offer valuable contributions to this dialogue and reframe the persistent questions concerning the academy in a more dynamic, accessible context.

Although the idea that academe and scholarly research are increasingly commercialized is not new by today's standards, it was only just becoming a documented concern during the time Atwood was writing this novel. In *The Dissenting Academy* (1968), Theodore Roszak presents

a series of essays in which this commercialization of academic culture is acknowledged and interrogated. Roszak argues that contemporary academic life is increasingly characterized by the "anxiety of careerist competition" (4) and "a condition of entrenched social irrelevance" (12). He criticizes the scholar's disconnection from the mentality of the philosophes, idealistic French intellectuals of the Enlightenment: "At one and the same time, the *philosophes* were keener minds, better servants of their society, and more effective educators than our contemporary academics manage to be. They held the balance that gracefully blended what has since been surrendered in our universities into mindless collaboration on the one hand and irrelevant research on the other" (29). Writing in the same volume, Louis Kampf relates Roszak's critique to the specific discipline of English literature: even though literary scholars "pretend . . . that their duties carry some social weight" (44), "Any prospective academic knows that literature is of interest only as it offers an opportunity for personal display, only as it become the means to a career" (48). The value of scholarly research, according to Kampf, has less to do with contributing to and shaping our cultural, moral, and social climate and more to do with self-interest; research is a commodity that is exchanged for career security and advancement in the form of either additional funding or job offers.

Most recent critics focus on the way in which "the university is evolving into the contemporary entrepreneurial university" (Etzkowitz et al. 1) and how this is problematic considering that, as William Graham suggests, "Scholarship and entrepreneurship are two different cultures, two different kinds of life: the life of the mind as opposed to the life of the bottom line" (27). In particular, these critics examine the student-professor dynamic as a concrete manifestation of the entrepreneurial, business-oriented impulse. The university produces a commodity — knowledge — that is marketed and packaged in such a way as to appeal to the targeted consumer — the student. Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), explores, in a similar vein, the state of the university in the post-industrial age:

> The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they

> produce and consume — that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production. (4)

Although critics such as George Ritzer align the producer of knowledge with the professor and the consumer with the student, Lyotard's assessment of the commodification of knowledge applies not only to the pedagogical side of academe, but also to the dynamic between the ostensible producers of this knowledge — that is, between the scholars who both produce and consume academic research. Lyotard acknowledges the "saleable" aspect of scholarship: on one level, it can be sold to students, but on another more entrenched level, it is exchanged and "sold" between scholars for career advancement. As Deborah L. Rhode observes, this "pursuit of prestige and profit . . . has too often hijacked the pursuit of knowledge" (3), ultimately compromising the quality and relevance of the resultant scholarship.

Not everyone agrees that the academy has been corrupted by commercialization, however; indeed, Lewis Hyde argues that there is a fundamental opposition between academic and capitalist values and practices. In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983), Hyde distinguishes between gift and market economies, arguing that the gift economy thrives on sharing and community whereas the market economy is predicated upon acquisition and profit. Drawing on the work of sociologist Warren Hagstrom, Hyde asserts that scholarly research falls under the purview of the gift economy because rather than receive money, "scientists who give their ideas to the community receive recognition and status in return" (77). Since scientists, and scholars more generally, receive status for their work — status that has value only within the scholarly community — the compensation for their work is the reputation needed to continue doing their work, to continue sharing knowledge with, and fostering the ideals of, their community.

Although Hyde's points are valid, he ultimately paints a portrait of an *ideal* scholarly community, one that does not necessarily match up to the reality. To be fair, he does acknowledge that "when people work with no goal other than that of attracting a better job, or getting tenure or higher rank . . . one finds specious and trivial research, not contributions to knowledge." He concludes, however, that it is only after a community of scholars, producing research and pursuing knowledge for its own sake, has firmly taken shape that we may "speak of dis-

sent, segmentation, differentiation, dispute, and all the other nuances of intellectual life" (83). He overlooks the fact that these "other nuances" have already taken hold of our academic culture and therefore warrant more attention. By locating scholarly research in the gift economy, he suggests that all of the careerist, competitive impulses that run counter to the ethic of sharing and community are not pronounced enough to pose a real danger.

Atwood's treatment of academe in *The Edible Woman* aligns her with the numerous critics who comment on its commercialization. In this novel, she demonstrates that the gap between the ideal community of scholars Hyde champions and the realities of academe is wider than he admits. Duncan's active resistance of the artificial categories upon which consumer culture is predicated speaks to his distaste for a corresponding set of limiting categories, patterns, and trends that shape academic research. Furthermore, her descriptions of Fischer's research and Duncan's disillusionment with such research demonstrate the compulsion of academics to prioritize fundable, marketable research projects above genuinely interesting, valuable ones. Although in this novel (as well as in others, such as in the "Historical Notes" epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* [1985]), Atwood critiques and satirizes scholarly values and practices in such a way that challenges Hyde's idealistic portrait of academe, in an interview with Rudolf Bader, she praises Hyde's book and appears to echo his position:

> One theory about the university is that it provides a sort of haven, or protected enclave, in which activities can go on that don't have any obvious commercial application. Academic work therefore affirms that there are human values apart from the making of money. . . . For more on the subject, see Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* — a book I'm in the habit of recommending to young writers. (188-89)

She outlines his argument without challenging it, suggesting that she endorses his belief that "academic work and artistic pursuits exist in the realm of the gift, and have value, or fail to have it, according to those laws" (189).

This somewhat contradictory attitude is characteristic of Atwood, who has always had a conflicted relationship with the academy — at times she praises this "protected enclave," while at others she strives to distance herself from it. Her personal experiences speak to her disillu-

sionment with the academic world, particularly the corrupting influence of heightened competition; during her years as a graduate student at Harvard University, where she obtained her master's degree in English literature but left before completing her PhD, she experienced a great deal of sexism. She has described the overall atmosphere as a "hell-hole of fierce competition; there were always a few suicides, people throwing themselves into the Charles River every spring off the bell tower" (qtd. in Sullivan 124). After leaving Harvard with a partially completed dissertation, she continued to cultivate an academic identity by teaching in universities throughout the 1960s and early 1970s and publishing numerous scholarly articles, essays, and reviews; among the most notable of her scholarly publications is *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), whose thesis, though widely debated, not only contributed to the field of Canadian literary criticism but also helped to shape it. Despite her continued scholarly activity and the fact that she is undeniably indebted to the academy (given that her success as a novelist has depended, at least in part, on the role the academy has played in both teaching and studying her works), Atwood is reluctant to identify herself as an academic. Yet, although she left the academy to pursue a writing career, a cursory overview of her oeuvre reveals that academic characters and concerns inform almost all of her novels (albeit to varying degrees), thereby emphasizing her enduring connection to (or at least interest in) the academic sphere.[1] It is perhaps misleading and erroneous to attribute Duncan's exceedingly jaded views to Atwood, but the critiques voiced by Duncan throughout *The Edible Woman* reflect Atwood's conflicted attitude as a former graduate student toward the academy as well as her concerns, however exaggerated, regarding a world with which she shares a lasting affinity; in particular, his persistent criticisms warn of the direction scholarly practices are heading as a result of a growing disconnection between the scholar and the ideal that should inform his or her work — the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Scholarly research should ideally be situated within Hyde's gift economy, but Atwood's novel, written soon after her departure from Harvard and thus during a period when she was taking stock of the academy and her role within it, demonstrates how an increasingly competitive and self-interested scholarly approach threatens to align academe more firmly with the much less idealized capitalist economy.

The Edible Woman draws on Atwood's academic background as well as on her brief experience working for Canadian Facts Marketing, a market research firm similar to the one at which her protagonist, Marian McAlpin, works. Atwood thus has first-hand experience of the two worlds — academe and consumer culture — that this novel interweaves. Marian, a young woman in her twenties, has recently graduated from college and is currently employed by a market research firm, Seymour Surveys. She seems to have a comfortable life, but her balanced state of mind soon begins to deteriorate as she experiences the pull from various forces and figures around her: her employer urges her to sign up for the company retirement plan, her fiancé Peter begins taking up more of her time and identity, and all around her she is bombarded by advertisements and products that impose particular lifestyles upon her. Marian begins to feel consumed. In an effort to cope, she attempts to opt out of consumer society by opting out of consumption altogether — she progressively eats less food as a misguided means of retaining her sense of self in this oppressive modern society. With the aid of her mysterious friend Duncan, an English graduate student who creatively attempts to evade the imposition of structure and roles by both consumer society and academe, Marian gradually reclaims both her identity and her ability to consume.

Since its publication in 1969, *The Edible Woman* has garnered a substantial, though not particularly diverse, sampling of criticism. T.D. MacLulich offers one of the more original readings — suggesting that an application of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural model of mythology can illuminate Marian's "dream-like hallucinations" (111) and her "'inner' or 'mythic' narrative" (112) — and highlights the limited nature of the critical response to this novel: "Most critics describe the book as primarily a novel of social commentary, an up-to-date comedy of manners. If we add the notion that *The Edible Woman* may be seen as a feminist polemic, depicting the narrow range of opportunities society offers to women, we have summarized the usual range of viewpoints" (112). Even though his article was published in 1978, it offers a relatively accurate assessment of the critical responses to the novel, the majority of which were published in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, as MacLulich notes, many critics highlight Atwood's social commentary, which D.J. Dooley defines as her exploration of "the virtual disappearance of human beings in a commercial culture" (138). They also examine

the gendered dimension of her critique and "interrogate the relation of the sexes in a consumer society" in which men have the upper hand (Srisermbhok 247). In examining the class and gender politics of consumer society, most critics inevitably focus their attention specifically on the character of Atwood's protagonist, Marian, who facilitates a microcosmic analysis of these broader contexts. While critics are divided as to how much Marian changes over the course of the novel — or whether she changes at all — they focus on her journey to self-empowerment and her attempts to negotiate the imposition of social roles and expectations and to balance them with her own desires.

Of particular note is the tendency of critics to relegate Atwood's treatment of academic concerns to the margins of their studies or, as is more often the case, to ignore it completely. Most critics acknowledge that Duncan is a graduate student, but rather than reflect on this fact, they simply present it as one of his many eccentricities and focus instead on how he facilitates Marian's exploration of her inner conflicts and desires. Sherrill Grace argues that "Duncan is most successful as a symbol of Marian's inner life or subconscious" (93); Catherine McLay observes of Duncan, "Both playful and animal, he is the guide who accompanies Marian on her downward journey, her descent into the dark side of self" (131); and Glenys Stow also describes him as a guide "who gradually leads [Marian] toward self-knowledge" (94). The existing criticism thus focuses primarily on Marian; secondary characters such as Duncan are analyzed only to reveal something further about the protagonist. Theodore F. Sheckels takes issue with the fact that critical studies of "Atwood's fiction [centre] on female characters, with male characters shoved in the background" (115); unfortunately, his contribution offers only a few superficial paragraphs about Duncan (indeed, none of the male characters receives in-depth attention in this brief article) and, therefore, does not compensate for this critical neglect. Unconvinced by Ann Parsons's assertion that "it is never safe to take Duncan too seriously" (104), I draw on these peripheral analyses in order to formulate a detailed exploration of the character of Duncan. Rather than treat him as a gateway to understanding Marian, I argue that he is a complex character in his own right, who is instrumental not only in furthering Marian's development, but also in advancing Atwood's critique of academe. Through his dissatisfaction with consumer society in general, and academe in particular, this reluctant consumer

and conflicted graduate student bridges these two spheres, demonstrating that just as consumer culture is predicated upon the exchange of commodities and dependent upon market desires, so too is academe: academic research is the commodity that is shaped by the demands of a specific self-interested market, the academic community. Francis Mansbridge is one of the few critics to acknowledge this direct parallel between academe and consumer culture: "The university, as portrayed in this novel, is little different from other segments of consumer society" (101). He does not examine this parallel further, however. Tracing a more substantial connection demonstrates that Duncan's general critique of consumer society relates to, and ultimately facilitates, a targeted interrogation of the academy.

Duncan is the perfect character to challenge society's values since he is apart from and resistant to social expectations. Commenting on the invasive presence of consumerism in *The Edible Woman*, John Lauber asserts, "the novel insistently asks whether and how anyone can achieve identity in the artificial society it presents" (20). While most of the other characters believe the answer lies in adopting artificial roles in keeping with the artificial society, Duncan opts for eschewing identity altogether; he tells Marian at one point that he would like to be an amoeba, an amorphous creature lacking boundaries, because "they're immortal . . . and sort of shapeless and flexible. Being a person is getting too complicated" (201). His desire to become an amoeba, a being that resists containment, speaks to his desire to evade consumer society's attempts to classify and categorize his existence.

In consumer society, "daily desires are satisfied through the acquisition and use of 'commodities,' goods which are produced for exchange and are on sale on the market" (Sassatelli 2). Prepackaged commodities are mass-produced and marketed to specific segments of society. In order for this society to function effectively, not only must the products be packaged in a particular way, but so too must the consumers. As Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer note, consumer society operates by "classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers" and "everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type" (5). Society must be clearly segmented into specific categories in order for the appropriate products to reach the appropriate market.

People like Marian are forced by social pressure into these pre-existing categories while others like Duncan subvert this imposed categorization by simultaneously occupying contradictory categories. Throughout the novel, Duncan emerges as an ambiguous character who is simultaneously old and young, death-like and vital, experienced and virginal, shrewd and naive. For example, when Marian first meets him while conducting a beer survey for Seymour Surveys, she asks, "Hello there, is your father in?" (49), thinking twenty-six-year-old Duncan is no more than fifteen years old. Duncan's youthful appearance does not equate with vitality and exuberance; by contrast, when Marian first sees him, she observes that he looks "cadaverously thin" (48). Most critics note Duncan's jarring sickly appearance: his "almost deathly thinness is emphasized" (Cameron 61), and he is "grotesquely emaciated" (Lauber 23). Far from suggesting youthful vitality, these descriptors convey a sense of death and decrepitude. That Duncan's physicality aligns him with death is fitting considering his fascination with this macabre topic. One of his favourite places is the mummy exhibit at the museum, where he likes to "meditate on immortality" (186). The mummies adhere to Duncan's favoured amoeba aesthetic in that they, too, are ambiguous and resistant to fixed labels — they have "stylized eyes" that "gazed up . . . with an expression of serene vacancy" (186), suggesting they continue to live on in death. The fact that Marian confuses the gender of one of the mummies further speaks to their shifting quality.

His combination of youth and deathly sickliness thus turns Duncan into a sort of "aged child" (Stein 46).[2] Indeed, during their first laundromat encounter, Marian notices this bizarre conflation of youth and age: "I could have reached out effortlessly and put my arms around that huddled awkward body and consoled it, rocked it gently. Still, there was something most unchildlike about him, something that suggested rather an unnaturally old man, old far beyond consolation" (99). Throughout the novel, Duncan looks to his peers (his roommates and Marian) as parental figures and nurturers, suggesting a childlike dependency, but at the same time, he is positioned as a wise, all-knowing guide for Marian, teaching her to question her surroundings and to resist social roles and expectations.

The more Marian is around Duncan, the more she experiences a destabilizing of distinct categories. This progressive blurring of boundaries begins the day she first meets him. That morning, she awakens

from a dream "in which [she] had looked down and seen [her] feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly" (43). As she sets out to conduct the beer surveys, she takes in the landscape around her: "The sky was cloudless but not clear: the air hung heavily, like invisible steam, so that the colours and outlines of objects in the distance were blurred" (44). After her encounter with Duncan, she realizes "The notes [she] had made of his answers were almost indecipherable in the glare of the sunlight; all [she] could see on the page was a blur of grey scribbling" (55). In each of these instances, Marian is confronted with the realization that the world cannot be definitively categorized and delineated. This realization is continually reinforced throughout her relationship with Duncan. His influence causes her to see the world as it really is — fluid, dynamic, and resistant to containment — and prompts her to recognize the constructed, artificial nature of consumer society.

In consumer society, clothing is one of the most overt and concrete means of outwardly manifesting the roles and categories one occupies. While most of the characters in the novel readily wear the types of clothing that match up to their social roles, Duncan once again resists this complicity with social categorization. At Peter's party, Marian steps outside of her comfort zone and wears a dress and hairstyle unlike her normal style; even though she feels uncomfortable, she dresses this way for Peter because he asks her to look "not quite so mousy" (208) at the party. He wants her clothing to correspond to her new social role so that she looks the way an ambitious young lawyer's wife-to-be should look. When Duncan sees Marian at the party, he remarks, "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade. . . . Who the hell are you supposed to be?" (239), indicating his disapproval that she has bought into this artificial game of self-fashioning. Even when dressed in her regular clothing, however, Marian displays a degree of social conformity; as Ainsley describes, Marian chooses "clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration" (13-14). Marian attempts to blend in with the masses. Peter's clothing is always described in terms of costumes. Early in the novel, Marian describes him as "wearing one of his more subdued costumes" (65), and later, she notes that "he was wearing one of his suave winter costumes" (146). Ainsley's description of Peter as being "nicely packaged" (146) is apt: he, perhaps more so than any other character in the novel, is conscious of how society expects him to look and thus packages himself accordingly.

Duncan, on the other hand, puts no stock in his appearance, let alone in his clothing. When Marian first meets him, he is wearing neither shirt nor shoes: "he was wearing only a pair of khaki pants" (49). Duncan's lack of interest in clothes and appearance is indicative of a larger rejection of the packaging and artificiality that pervade consumer culture, including academe. His only interest in clothes is washing and ironing them, as both activities provide him with a momentary respite from the chaos of modern society. The laundromat is "soothing because you always know what to expect and you don't have to think about it" (94), while of ironing, Duncan remarks, "I get all tangled up in words when I'm putting together those interminable papers . . . and ironing — well, you straighten things out and get them flat" (142). Clothing for Duncan, then, is a means of escaping social categories rather than conforming to their dictates. By not dressing up and packaging himself the way Peter does, Duncan resists social conformity and the "classifying, organizing, and labeling" (Adorno and Horkheimer 5) that characterize consumer culture. And by cultivating a relationship with clothes that enables him — through laundering and ironing — to opt out of thinking and writing, he escapes the convoluted nature of academic research in favour of simple, calming activity.

Duncan's conflation (and at times outright avoidance) of categories not only disrupts the organizing impulse upon which consumer culture is predicated, but it also destabilizes a corresponding academic impulse: indeed, literary scholars in particular have a tendency to align their subjects of study with established traditions and influences, classifying, organizing, and labeling their subjects in accordance with recognizable literary patterns. He believes that in both consumer culture and academe, this compulsion to classify and organize everything fosters a sense of artificiality — the fluidity of organic experience cannot be contained within finite categories nor can productive research be undertaken from the confines of minutely specialized niches. As Atwood notes in an interview with Geoff Hancock, "If you're an academic, you have to concern yourself more with 'ideas,'" and "if you deal in 'ideas' you can analyze the structure, the prose, the style, or this and that. But as soon as you do that, you're analyzing, making an abstraction from the actual thing" (197). Academics lose sight of, and become abstracted from, their scholarly subjects when they manipulate them into conforming with predetermined categories and traditions upon which they have staked

their professional claim. Rather than depart from pre-existing trends and traditions in order to investigate more fruitfully the work in question, academics, according to Duncan, "repeat themselves and repeat themselves but they never get anywhere" (95), compelled to work within these established standards and conventions, producing research that shares fundamental similarities.

Duncan's refusal to fit within any one category, his insistence on occupying opposing classifications simultaneously, suggests his desire not to be anything in particular, or not to *be* at all: "In other words, his response to being as it is defined in the modern mercantile world — fitting into the cycle of production and consumption, making one kind of garbage into another — is to come as close as possible to not-being" (Dooley 142). Throughout the novel, he is drawn to images and representations of "not-being," from the mummies at the museum and the death they represent to the fluidity and transience of snow. When Marian and Duncan go for a walk near the ravine, Duncan remarks, "I like this place. Especially now in winter, it's so close to absolute zero. . . . But in the snow you're as near as possible to nothing" (263). He finds comfort in nothingness, and when the imprint of their bodies threatens to leave concrete traces in the snow, "he stepped on them, first on his own and then on hers, smearing the snow with his foot" (265).

Duncan's apprehension at leaving behind any sort of mark also carries into his academic life, where he strives yet again to attain a state of "not-being." He has a problematic relationship with language throughout the novel. Although he has no problems talking and endlessly verbalizing his analyses of those around him, he seems unable to write, "for he sees all writing, not only his own, as the accumulation of garbage" (Carrington 83). He has a fear of committing his thoughts to a fixed medium, which will become a part of the academic consumer culture he disdains and in which his roommates, Trevor and Fischer, actively participate. This aversion to writing is demonstrated by his incomplete term papers and his inability to progress in his degree at the same rate as his roommates. As he remarks to Marian during one of their first encounters, "Right now I'm supposed to be writing an overdue term paper from the year before last" (97). Later, he informs her that he is at work on another paper, but "had been stuck on the opening sentence . . . for two and a half weeks" (183). He has difficulty committing his words to paper because not only does he believe that the cycle of produc-

tion and consumption that his term papers will ultimately enter into is meaningless and repetitive, but he finds that the words themselves are meaningless. According to Duncan, the monotony of scholarly research divests the words and ideas of any real significance: "You read and read the material and after you've read the twentieth article you can't make any sense out of it anymore, and then you start thinking about the number of books that are published in any given year, in any given month, in any given week, and that's just too much. Words . . . are beginning to lose their meanings" (95-96). Consequently, he is no hurry to contribute to a scholarly enterprise that to him is rapidly losing all sense of credibility and relevance. Duncan avoids becoming complicit in the consumer culture he criticizes by not only minimizing his social output, but his academic output as well, "never bringing either his studies or his personal relationships to any culmination, any sense of stability" (Page 16).

Atwood offers a targeted critique of the academy by highlighting Duncan's disillusionment with the types of research projects carried out by Fischer and Trevor, who are also English graduate students. Fischer describes his bizarre research interests to Marian at the dinner party at the graduate students' home. David Harkness asserts that the "frivolity of the scene undercuts any temptation for the reader to take Fish's critical analysis seriously" (103). This scene is important, however, because Fischer's research interests, as ludicrous as they may appear, demonstrate the degree to which academics have become governed by market demands and increasingly narrowed specializations. He displays his awareness of the commodified nature of scholarly research when he remarks to Marian regarding his interest in Lewis Carroll, "The nineteenth century is very hot property these days" (193). His choice of scholarly subject — specifically, his decision to pursue Lewis Carroll instead of his initial subject, Beatrix Potter — is thus determined, at least in part, by his adherence to market demands, to the research areas promoted by, and popular on, the academic market. When he begins discussing with Marian his interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland*, he states, "this is the little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit-burrow, becoming as it were pre-natal, trying to find her role . . . her role as a Woman" (194). Trevor also reveals his awareness of market demands and trends when he dismisses Fischer's approach as being "out of *date*. . . . The very latest approach to *Alice* is just to dismiss it as a rather charming children's book" (194-95).

Perhaps in an effort to show how up-to-date he is, Fischer soon shifts to discussing his proposed thesis topic, “Malthus and the Creative Metaphor” (197), which he believes is so cutting-edge that it may be rejected by what he deems to be his “conservative” school. When he describes to Marian this study, in which he plans to use Thomas Robert Malthus (an early nineteenth-century demographer) as a point of entry to analyze the connection between birth rates and the changing face of poetry during this period,[3] his explanations degenerate into the ridiculous and his language becomes a self-parody:

> The poet was pregnant with his work, the poem went through a period of gestation, often a long one, and when it was finally ready to see the light of day the poet was delivered of it often with much painful labour. In this way the very process of artistic creation was itself an imitation of Nature, of the thing in nature that was most important to the survival of Mankind. I mean birth; birth. (198)

According to Fischer, when birth rates began to rise and population growth became a concern, birth was no longer as beautiful and as welcome a phenomenon. As such, poetry shifted from mimicking the process of childbirth to something less drawn out and more spontaneous: “the very act of copulation” (200).

Not only is Atwood mocking the (at times) pretentious language of academics, but she is also satirizing the pursuit of absurdly obscure topics. Fischer has fallen victim to an inevitable aspect of scholarly research that Duncan explains to Marian:

> Everything’s being done, it’s been done already, fished out, and you yourself wallowing around in the dregs at the bottom of the barrel, one of those ninth-year graduate students, poor bastards, scrabbling through manuscripts for new material or slaving away on the definitive edition of Ruskin’s dinner-invitations and theatre-stubs or trying to squeeze the last pimple of significance out of some fraudulent literary nonentity they dug up somewhere. (96-97)

Fischer has clearly succumbed to the pressure to choose an obscure topic in order to secure a unique scholarly niche, which will enable him to advance his publication profile and reputation. Careerist concerns have supplanted his scholarly idealism. That he is compelled to choose a topic with barely even the semblance of broader relevance reinforces the

degree to which commercial and professional interests can undermine the potential value and resonance of literary scholarship.

Commenting on scholarly research, Duncan explicitly articulates the increasing connection he sees between consumer and academic culture: "Production-consumption. You begin to wonder whether it isn't just a question of making one kind of garbage into another kind. The human mind was the last thing to be commercialized but they're doing a good job of it now" (143). According to Duncan, consumer culture leads to a leveling effect whereby an impulse toward standardization dilutes risk and worthwhile experimentation. Even though, as Fischer's scholarly pursuits demonstrate, academics strive to produce innovative research, this innovation is often pursued for the wrong reasons: rather than attempt to uncover untrammeled ground out of an idealistic desire to advance knowledge, Duncan suggests scholars do so in order to add to their dossier. Moreover, this innovation is most often contained by prevailing academic standards and conventions. As Douglas B. Holt notes of consumer culture, "The logic of mass marketing leads to least common denominator goods that produce a conformity of style, marginalize risk taking, and close down interpretation" (71). Similarly, in academe, through scholarly publications and conferences, particular scholarly approaches are mass-marketed and become the least common denominator to which subsequent research conforms. New and exciting research is produced, but it is ultimately circumscribed by the structures and expectations that shape the field of literary discourse, leading to a certain uniformity and predictability that Duncan bemoans throughout the novel. Although ideally "the university must also raise questions that society does not want to ask and generate new ideas that help invent the future, at times even 'pushing' society toward it" (Shapiro 4-5), in a competitive scholarly climate in which self-interest and professional advancement are prioritized, this ideal is undermined and dismissed in favour of pursuing research projects that offer stronger assurances of success. "The 'intellectual' world of Duncan and his roommates Trevor and Fish offers no real alternative to the consumer society" (Lauber 26) because these two realms have become conflated — intellectual pursuits are increasingly dictated by commercial demands and interests.

That Atwood ultimately grounds her critique of academe in the realm of consumer culture is telling. The notion that we live in a consumer society is not an entirely welcome one. Although we cannot extri-

cate ourselves from the patterns of production and consumption that regulate and maintain our lifestyles, we tend not to embrace the label "consumer society." As Roberta Sassatelli notes of this label, "from its very first appearance, this term has been used more to convey condemnation than to describe" and has "served to stigmatize what appeared to be a growing and uncontrolled passion for material things . . . a continuous and unremitting search for new, fashionable but superfluous things" (2). Thus, the idea of consumer society connotes superficiality, a preoccupation with the surface and with fashionable packaging at the expense of actual content and substance.

Atwood's repeated association of academe with consumer culture suggests that she believes literary scholarship is also becoming empty in some sense, that it is lacking in genuine substance and overly concerned with presentation. The academic market, as depicted by Duncan, has become so saturated with publications and conference presentations that the content of the research often matters little; what matters is that something is being produced to feed the machine of academic production and consumption. Scholarship should be undertaken for its own sake rather than to gain a competitive edge, and scholars should be risk takers, willing to explore unsavoury and unpopular topics out of a sincere desire to connect with and understand the world around them. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood somewhat paradoxically employs Duncan, a character jaded to the point of apathy, to inspire a greater degree of self-awareness and self-examination among the academics in her audience. Commenting on the task of the fiction writer, Atwood writes, "what kind of world shall you describe for your readers? The one you can see around you, or the better one you can imagine? If only the latter, you'll be unrealistic; if only the former, despairing. But it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have. If we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse" ("Witches" 6). Although she by no means offers an idealized portrait of academe in this novel, neither does she paint an entirely negative one. Through Duncan, she expresses her concern with the increasing encroachment of commercial ideology on scholarly endeavours. In so doing, she prompts an examination into the purpose and value of literary scholarship in the hopes that an increased self-awareness within the academic community will prevent an already compromised set of scholarly values from degrading into something "infinitely worse."

Although contemporary literary scholars will likely take issue with Duncan claiming in the 1960s that everything has "been done already" (96), his repeated assertions that the field of literary scholarship is becoming saturated, or filled up in some sense, speak to the unprecedented growth and development during this decade of the Canadian university as a whole and of Canadian literary criticism in particular. Not only were student enrolment rates and faculty hirings increasing significantly during this decade (Horn 247), but Canadian literary scholarship was also becoming much more professionalized. With the Massey Report recommendations of 1951, the establishment of the National Library in 1953, the introduction of both the New Canadian Library series and the Canada Council in 1957, and the emergence of such scholarly journals as *Canadian Literature* in 1959, the infrastructure was in place for the institutionalization of Canadian literature and an accompanying industry of literary criticism (Lecker 73; Murray 75). These factors, as well as the incorporation of European poststructuralist theory in the late 1960s and 1970s, produced an increasingly professionalized and specialized literary discourse, which was also private in the sense that it was becoming less accessible to a general public (both physically, since scholarly publications are often not made available in publicly accessible locations, and in terms of content and style). Atwood's novel is thus well-timed to engage with the questions that were arising at the time concerning both the potential social resonance and relevance of literary scholarship as well as the difficulties of producing unique, worthwhile studies during a time when there was a significantly higher number of fellow scholars (and thus competitors) within the university. Situating her academic critique within a larger commentary on consumer culture is especially appropriate considering the fact that the 1960s was the era of the counterculture, a time when society was beginning to react to and challenge the growing infiltration of consumer culture and its invasive marketing tactics. With the changes occurring in both academe and consumer culture at this same time, it is fitting for Atwood to critique both of these spheres in her novel, revealing the ways in which they are interconnected.

In his introduction to the 1973 McClelland and Stewart edition of *The Edible Woman*, Alan Dawe writes, "Dating originally from 1965 and slightly revised in 1967, this book shows promise of still being digestible ten years hence" (n. pag.). The novel has exceeded Dawe's

modest projection, maintaining its relevance twenty-seven years after the publication of his introduction and demonstrating the potential to endure for several more to come. Indeed, this novel is valuable for being among the first works of Canadian fiction to engage in this critical discussion of the commercialization of academic pursuits and for articulating an enduring message: by aligning academe with consumer culture, Atwood cautions against a preoccupation with surface rewards and careerist competition that obscures the ostensible purpose underlying scholarly research — the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

Notes

[1] In *Lady Oracle* (1976), for example, Joan's husband, Arthur, is a political science professor. In *Life Before Man* (1979), paleontologist Lesje is almost completely defined by her research interests; similarly, in *The Robber Bride* (1993), military historian Tony sees evidence of war everywhere, from her university to her home. The "Historical Notes" epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) provides a compelling satire of academic symposia. In *Cat's Eye* (1988), a novel which shares several autobiographical parallels with Atwood's life, the father of the protagonist, Elaine, is an entomologist and professor in the zoology department at the University of Toronto, while her brother, Stephen, eventually becomes an astrophysicist. Elaine goes against family expectations and pursues an art (rather than biology) degree, but she makes sure to complement her painting classes with the more pragmatic "Advertising Art," a course which attracts students who are "cleaner and more earnest, and they want paying jobs when they graduate" (328). In *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Iris's letters in reply to scholars seeking archival material and other assorted information in relation to her novel (thought to have been written by her sister Laura) offer rather biting criticisms of literary scholarship: "Dear Ms. X., I acknowledge your letter concerning your proposed thesis, though I can't say its title makes a great deal of sense to me. Doubtless it does to you or you would not have come up with it. I cannot give you any help. Also you do not deserve any. 'Deconstruction' implies the wrecking ball, and 'problematize' is not a verb" (286-87). And in *Oryx and Crake*, whereas Crake attends the highly respected Watson-Crick Institute, the site of valuable scientific research initiatives that ostensibly benefit society as a whole, Jimmy's relatively lacklustre high-school transcript leaves him with few options, and so he accepts an offer of admission to the Martha Graham Academy, a poorly funded and poorly maintained arts and humanities college. The curriculum is described as being "pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything" (187).

[2] Judging from the readers' reports for *The Edible Woman*, early readers of the novel did not see any significance to Duncan's ambiguous age. Consider, for example, this anonymous, undated report: "I think it is a pity that in the page 47-50 sequence, Duncan is so firmly established in the reader's mind as almost a child — the use of the word 'boy' the insistence that he looks 10 years old — or 15 years old — gives a false impression he is very small or short or immature. This is not the case" (Atwood Papers, MS Coll. 200, box 95, folder 5).

[3] In her April 1970 and July 1971 screenplay adaptations of *The Edible Woman*, Atwood revises Fischer's research interests so that rather than study the connection between birth rates and poetry, he looks instead at the connection between birth rates and "the growth of the television industry" (Atwood Papers, MS Coll. 200, box 84, folder 1), making the link between academic research and modern consumer society all the more pronounced.

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