

# Mirror Images in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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*I planned my death carefully, unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror.*

Thus Margaret Atwood opens her novel *Lady Oracle*.<sup>1</sup> The passage is paradigmatic, for it illuminates a specular play of openness and closure, of sameness and difference, of multiple voices and resounding silences. As Atwood's work progresses, the text, like the heroine's life, opens, spreads, and multiplies beyond boundaries. The open form of *Lady Oracle* is integrally related to a problem which has influenced modern feminist theory: the problem of articulating what has been silenced by a language which reduces the other to the same. In her attempt to express a female language which has been repressed, Atwood does not begin outside the boundaries of phallogocentric discourse. Instead, she presents what Linda Hutcheon refers to as an "unmasking of dead conventions by challenging, by mirroring."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout *Lady Oracle* Atwood continually displaces closed structures with open ones. Although Atwood's heroine tries to plan, control, and close her life with death, Joan Foster's life runs out of the frames others erect for her and which she erects for herself. Joan Foster's mother attempts to frame and enclose her daughter's body. Nonetheless, Joan's body "[swells] visibly, relentlessly" beyond the territory her mother has designated (67). Despite Mrs. Foster's attempt to enclose the furniture with transparent covers, to render the house "static and dustless and final," the painters and movers enter the house, "trailing disruption" (68). Aunt Lou's lifestyle is characterized by an openness which threatens the closure Mrs. Foster imposes on her own life. Mrs. Foster encases herself in constricting

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<sup>1</sup> (Toronto: McClelland, 1976) 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1980) 18.

gloves, dresses, and shoes; her hair is carefully arranged in "stiff immaculate curls" (87). From Aunt Lou's head, however, "wisps escape" as threads escape from her hems (87).

Loose ends and threads permeate Atwood's work. The threads which escape from Aunt Lou's head are inextricably linked to a whole fabric of loose ends. Joan Foster remarks, "My life was a snarl, a rat's nest of dangling threads and loose ends. I couldn't possibly have a happy ending, but I wanted a neat one" (294). The loose ends of Joan Foster's life overlap with the loose ends of the text she writes. Joan Foster's novel seems like "a Gothic gone wrong" with "no happy ending" (234). Furthermore, the texts Atwood alludes to introduce still more loose ends which escape frames and other structures of enclosure. Atwood repeatedly alludes to "The Lady of Shalott." Like Joan Foster, the Lady of Shalott escapes from the frame of the mirror and leaves loose ends:

She left the web, she left the loom  
She made three paces through the room

Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirrror cracked from side to side.<sup>3</sup>

Atwood, like Joan Foster, like the Lady of Shalott, escapes from the frame of the mirror. By transforming the closed, static mirror into an open one, Atwood disrupts the conventional mirror image which recurs in so many literary and psychoanalytic works. Mirrors have long been associated with the subject/object, active/passive dichotomies which Atwood destabilizes in *Lady Oracle*. Umberto Eco remarks, in *Semiotics and The Philosophy of Language*, that the mirror produces "a duplication of both my body as an object and my body as a subject, splitting and facing itself."<sup>4</sup> Lacan's psychoanalytic theory also presents the mirror and the divided self. After Lacan's mirror stage, the division of the subject leads to a symbolic order, establishing the predominant superego and the phallus as signifier. In her critique of Lacan, Luce Irigaray locates a tendency in Lacan's theory to use the mirror as a medium which reproduces the subject and reduces women, the other, to the same. Irigaray argues that "the priority of symmetry . . . co-relates with that of the flat mirror—which may be used for its constitution as subject of discourse."<sup>5</sup> What Irigaray advocates in her femin-

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford UP, 1953) 27: 3.5.

<sup>4</sup> (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 210.

<sup>5</sup> *The Sex Which Is Not One* (New York: Cornell UP, 1985) 129.

ist theory is a disruption of those orders which make woman, the inverted other, invisible.

Atwood's *Lady Oracle* intersects with Irigaray's feminist theory, for her work ceaselessly disrupts the traditional role of the mirror. During the course of Atwood's novel, mirrors do not merely produce a subject/object dichotomy in which the object is the subservient term. Rather, the mirrors in *Lady Oracle* display a multiplicity of divisions, a complete fragmentation or dispersion of the self. Joan Foster's mother has a "triple mirror, so she [can] see both sides as well as the front of her head" (63). Thus the mirror, which usually produces the double, the subject and his shadow, produces a triple image which disrupts duality. In her dream, Joan Foster sees the first three reflections and then three actual heads on three separate necks. Atwood further divides an original division later in the novel, for Joan Foster remarks, "I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many" (247). Similarly, as Arthur watches the broken television set, the doubling of characters soon becomes a multiplying of characters. Each of the skaters has four legs, and when they fall, they multiply. Hence, in her novel Atwood displays a kind of open discourse, which Irigaray celebrates in her theory, a language which, "always at least double, goes even further: it is plural . . . more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex . . . than is commonly imagined—in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness" (28).

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, the multiplicity of allusions to the mirrors of other texts frustrates the reader's desire for a binary system which establishes a dominant subject. At one point in the work, Atwood presents an overlapping of texts, of layers of narration, a remarkable specular play which forces the reader to participate actively in the production of the text. Within Atwood's work are Joan Foster's novels, which, in turn, echo other texts. In one of the Gothic novels she writes, Joan Foster alludes to *Through the Looking Glass*, for her heroine, like Alice in Lewis Carroll's work, crosses through the mirror:

further into the mirror she went, and further, till she seemed to be walking on the other side of the glass, in a land of indistinct shadows. (220)

Just as her heroine crosses through the mirror, so Joan Foster crosses through the mirror. Atwood's overlapping of narratives forces the reader to separate the two strands of the text.

The mirror Joan Foster looks into becomes an objective correlative for the infinitude of process which characterizes Atwood's narrative. If she moves both sides of the mirror towards her, Joan Foster sees "an infinite number of candles, extending a line as far as [she can] see" (221). Furthermore, Joan Foster comments, "nor could I ever get to the end of the corridor" (224). Joan wants desperately "to see what [is] at the other end" (222). While journeying through the mirror, Joan Foster hopes that she will find "the thing, the truth or word" (223).

After having written the word "bow" during her voyage through the mirror, Joan searches for the meaning of the word. When she looks up "bow" in the thesaurus, Joan discovers that the one word disintegrates, splinters into an infinite array of meanings. Just as Foster's desire for an end, the truth, the word, is frustrated, so the reader's desire for a universal is frustrated. The reader, searching for the meaning of the word, finds herself at what Eco describes as "the focal point of a network of limitless interrelations." The word "bow," as Joan's thesaurus reveals, is in and of itself an ambiguous term. It may mean "curtsy," "prow," "cringe," "arch". . . (222). Within the context of Atwood's work, the word "bow" does not recall any one bow mentioned previously in *Lady Oracle*. Instead the word echoes many bows, bows which recur not only in Atwood's text but in the various texts Atwood alludes to—from the ubiquitous Cupid's bow, to the bow in *The Odyssey*, to the bow in "The Lady of Shalott."

What is particularly interesting is that the word Atwood chooses to destabilize, "bow," is a term which, in literature, has become aligned with masculinity and universality. In *The Odyssey*, the bow Odysseus uses to outwit the suitors is set in opposition to the endless process of weaving Penelope uses to outwit them. Odysseus' bow comes to signify oneness and sameness. The stringing of the bow, unlike the process of weaving, is a single, unified gesture of strength:

Taking the string and the head grooves he drew to the middle grip, and from the very chair where he sat, bending the bow before him, let the arrow fly, nor missed any axes from the first handle on, but the bronze-weighted arrow passed through all, and out the other end.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper, 1977) 21.419-28.

Penelope's weaving in *The Odyssey* conveys the openness, the infinitude of process, which marks Atwood's novel. Penelope's work, like Joan Foster's, resists closure. While she awaits the return of Odysseus, Penelope postpones choosing one of the suitors as a husband by entering an endless process of weaving and unravelling Laertes' shroud. Penelope's work at the loom belongs to a whole network of weaving imagery in *Lady Oracle*. The allusions to "The Lady of Shalott" link the Lady of Shalott's weaving to Penelope's, for the Lady of Shalott becomes involved in an incessant process which never yields a product. Weaving "by night and day a magic web" (II.1), the Lady of Shalott is entrapped in an infinite process. When the Lady of Shalott leaves the mirror and the web, the work remains unfinished, for the web flies out and floats wide. The threads of the Lady of Shalott's web merge with Ariadne's thread, which Joan Foster alludes to in her Gothic novel. Just as Ariadne uses thread to guide Theseus through the labyrinth, so Charlotte, in Joan Foster's novel, uses knitting wool to find her way through a maze. Joan Foster's novel departs from the myth of Ariadne, however, for Foster's heroine, Charlotte, becomes entrapped in a process, "hopelessly entangled" in a web from which she cannot extricate herself (334).

The infinitude of process and the open mirror in *Lady Oracle* are often accompanied by a kind of fluidity which has influenced much twentieth-century feminist criticism. In her feminist theory, Hélène Cixous argues that "A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it doesn't stop. . . ." Furthermore, Cixous relates this endlessness to fluidity, remarking, "the movement of the text doesn't trace a straight line. I see it as an outpouring."<sup>7</sup> Irigaray similarly affirms the importance of fluids, arguing that fluids disrupt static systems, "solid mechanics and rationality" (113).

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, fluids, like loose ends, flow over boundaries. Joan Foster longs to be, like the Lady of Shalott, in a death barge, floating down the river. At the end of the novel, Joan creates a process of dissolution, writing her own script in which she drowns in Lake Ontario. Dissolution and dispersion in Atwood's work become associated with mirrors. When she looks at her face in the rearview mirror, Joan feels as though she is "genuinely drowned" (307). As Charlotte's script flows into Joan Foster's script, Charlotte undergoes a process of dissolution. Looking in the mirror, Charlotte sees that, "there was water, she

<sup>7</sup> "Castration or Decapitation?," trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7 (1981): 54.

was gazing up at herself from beneath the surface of a river" (321).

Atwood further dissolves the static, framed mirror, for the mirrors Joan Foster encounters are warped and distorted. Earlier in Foster's Gothic novel, Charlotte looks into a bedroom mirror which is warped. While she is at the exhibition, Joan enters a place called "Laugh in the Dark" where distorting mirrors stretch and shrink her. It is in this scene that Atwood links mirrors, fluidity, and laughter. As Joan Foster enters "Laugh in the Dark," "laughter [issues] in a never-ending stream" (88). Cixous, in her feminist theory, similarly links openness, fluidity, and laughter. She celebrates an "endless laughter . . . laughter that breaks out, overflows" (55).

During the course of *Lady Oracle*, Atwood's use of ellipsis underlines the open-ended, fluid structure of her text. Atwood undermines the conventional division of subject and object in the mirror by suggesting that something escapes the process of duplication. When Mrs. Foster finishes looking in the mirror, she becomes sad, for she sees "behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she [is] unable to capture or duplicate" (63). The photograph is a variation of the mirror, for it may be used to reproduce the subject and keep the object—the other—invisible, excluded from Lacan's symbolic order. Atwood, however, makes visible what is supposed to remain hidden, repressed. There is a sense in *Lady Oracle* of photographs which escape the order of photo albums and of essences which escape the frames of photographs. When Joan Foster pores over her mother's photographs, what becomes most visible are the missing photos. Joan Foster notices the absence of snapshots which record her mother's childhood, her parents, her brothers, her sister. What is more apparent than the pictures of Joan as a baby is the absence of photos of her mother. Although Joan sends her North American publishers the photograph of herself with Aunt Lou, the photo is never used. The picture never appears on the book jacket but remains hidden, invisible.

Jacques Derrida, in *Writing and Difference*, suggests that ellipsis is a kind of displacement of origin or center. He asks, "Is not center, the absence of play and difference, another name for death?"<sup>8</sup> Indeed Atwood links photographs and photo albums with death. Joan Foster, noticing Arthur's elegiac tendency, comments that he speaks of things "as if they were snap-shots in some long-buried photograph album" (269). Furthermore, when

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<sup>8</sup> Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978) 297.

she is around Arthur, Joan's gestures become "petrified," and "each kiss embalmed" (269). Joan feels as though she is a collectible and has to remind Arthur she is not yet dead. In the Royal Porcupine's artwork, framed pictures become literally translated into death. The Royal Porcupine's art show exhibits dead animals encased in freezers with glass tops. The animals are "quick-frozen in exactly the poses they'd been discovered in" (242).

Moreover, Atwood underlines the relationship between death and the framed picture, for she gives an example of a label for an artwork, "composition #72, 5' x 9', acrylic and nylon tubing" (242). After he finds a dead dog one night, the Royal Porcupine encloses it in a large freezer and ties the limbs of the corpse to preserve the dog's original position. Joan Foster notices a picture of the Royal Porcupine hanging beside "a formal portrait of the Queen and Prince Philip . . . in a heavy gilt frame" (246). Thus Atwood links death with the formal, framed picture, the bounded text. The solid, static art of the Royal Porcupine contrasts sharply with Joan Foster's fluid lifestyle and her own Gothic novels. As the Royal Porcupine explains to Joan, his work exemplifies solidity and stasis. He calls his art "Con-create poetry" and declares himself "the man who put the creativity back in concrete" (243).

What is particularly interesting is that Atwood paradoxically frames her novel with the disruption of a frame. Joan Foster's attempts to frame her life with death are disrupted. *Lady Oracle* opens with Joan's plans for death. Nonetheless, Joan's life, which "meanders," "festoons," and "scrolls," disrupts her planned death. By the end of the novel, the reader is reminded of the narrator's opening words, "I planned my death carefully" (3). Indeed, Joan carefully plans her drowning in Lake Ontario. At the end of *Lady Oracle*, however, Joan's life runs on, beyond her staged death. Hence, Atwood disrupts the conventional methods of closure, for she ends the work neither with the death nor with the happy ending. Similarly, Atwood disrupts the frame of Joan Foster's work. Not only is Foster's work a "Gothic novel gone wrong" with no happy ending, but when Joan begins her work earlier in *Lady Oracle*, she realizes the first eight pages are missing. The ellipsis in Joan's work disrupts a beginning, what Derrida refers to as "the origin," the absence of play and difference . . . the death" (297).

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, Atwood uses ellipsis to make apparent silenced, hidden voices. Ellipsis in Atwood's work, however, becomes powerful only in relation to a multiplicity of voices. While producing an open text, Atwood does not escape

closed texts but disrupts them. Atwood's highly self-reflexive work gives rise to a paradox which, Hutcheon argues, characterizes all metafiction; the more the self-reflexive text demands the reader's active participation, the more the work distances the reader (7). Atwood's novel displays this simultaneous movement inward and outward. During the course of *Lady Oracle*, Atwood reworks conventions. She retraverses boundaries, crossing through the mirror to the other side and back again.

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