

PENNING IN THE BODIES: THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED SUBJECTS IN ALICE MUNRO'S *BOYS AND GIRLS*

Marlene Goldman

"My father was a fox farmer." So begins Alice Munro's short story "Boys and Girls," a narrative which highlights the almost invisible societal forces which shape children, in this case, the narrator and her brother Laird, into gendered adults. There is no doubt that males and females are biologically distinct at birth. Yet the behaviours and roles ascribed to each sex on the basis of this biological distinction are not natural. In this study, then, when I speak of gender, I refer not to sex, but to this set of prescribed behaviours.

Children, as the text clearly illustrates, do not evolve naturally into gendered adults. Instead, the construction of gendered subjects constitutes a form of production. Yet unlike other systems of production, the mechanisms which assist in the creation of gendered adults remain invisible; they seem natural, and for this reason they are taken for granted.

One such "invisible" mechanism, central to the production of gendered adults, involves the division and control of space. In "Boys and Girls," spatial divisions and the control of space within the home and on the farm are emphasized by a narrator still young enough to remark upon details which the adults ignore. As a result of the narrator's relatively innocent and inquisitive perspective, the reader can appreciate how the division of space facilitates two seemingly disparate systems of production: farming and the construction of gendered adults.

As a farmer, the father cultivates wild animals for the purpose of consumption. As the narrator explains, he "raised silver foxes in pens." The word "raised" refers to silver foxes, but the term offers more than this strictly referential meaning. It can

also be understood within the familial context: people often speak of raising children. The plurality of the word opens the text to diverse readings—readings which introduce the possibility of a correspondence between the two systems of production.

In particular, the father raises the foxes in “pens”—spaces in which bodies are confined and controlled. As the narrator explains, he took great pains to build a miniature city for his captives: “alive, the foxes inhabited a world my father made for them.”¹ Moreover, the pens resembled a medieval town “padlocked at night” (114). This image of the enclosure and the concomitant distinction between inside and outside (indoor and outdoor) recur throughout the text.

Early on, the house takes on the properties of the pen. The dark, hot, stifling kitchen imprisons the narrator’s mother and threatens to imprison the narrator (116-8). Similarly, the fields surrounding the farm and the gates, which restrict traffic, become an enlarged version of the pen (124). Finally, the town itself and the outlying farms are conceived of in terms of an inescapable enclosure (125). As a result of these replications of the enclosure, the father’s occupation and his role in establishing and supervising the boundaries between inside and outside take on greater significance and begin to reflect a far more pervasive cultural project.

The Marxist critic Ivan Illich sheds light on the nature of this project when he suggests that the capacity to enclose, essentially a male privilege, was the key factor responsible for the emergence of industrial society and wage work as we know it today. Illich states that the economic division of labor into a productive and a non-productive kind was pioneered and first enforced through “the domestic enclosure of women.” As he explains, men became the “wardens of their domestic women” (107). Thus, the narrator’s father, in his capacity as guardian and gate-keeper penning in the bodies, performs a task which supports industrial society and wage work, and ultimately, capitalist production.

In addition to enclosing the foxes, the father in “Boys and Girls” also controls a specific space within the home. When not working out of doors, he carries out his activities in the cellar, a room which is white-washed and lit by a hundred-watt bulb. By definition, white-wash is “a solution of quicklime or of whiting

and size for brushing over walls and ceilings to give a clean appearance." Figuratively speaking, "white washing" suggests clearing "a person or his memory of imputation or [clearing] someone's reputation" (OED). In this case, the presence of white-wash in the male domain suggests that an attempt is made to "give something a clean appearance"—something which may be fundamentally unclean.

Furthermore, the intense light which illuminates the space also reflects the father's desire to control or, more specifically, to manipulate one's impression of his territory. In his book *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault studies the use of light in various structures in terms of the desire to maintain an arbitrary, yet powerful force. He concludes that "a form of power whose main instance is that of opinion will refuse to tolerate areas of darkness" (154). Thus the white-wash and the bright lights in the cellar effectively undermine the seeming neutrality of the father and his activities.

Initially, although sensitive to the details of the procedure, the narrator takes it for granted that the father's work—the raising of foxes—is an ideologically neutral activity, one without agency. It simply "happens" in the fall and early winter that he "killed and skinned and sold their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Co" (111). But the commercial basis of the slaying undercuts any claims to neutrality. The father's occupation is enmeshed in a cultural discourse which imposes specific views upon the world.

The narrator, however, remains unaware of the implications of her father's activities for some time. She feels safe in the male sphere and enjoys the "warm, safe, brightly lit downstairs world." She feels threatened, not by the male domain or the icy winter world outside, but by the "inside," the "unfinished," upper portion of the house, the bedroom which she shares with her brother Laird (112). Unlike the clearly delineated male territory below, the bedroom remains undifferentiated. Neither male nor female, the space is fraught with danger. Poorly lit, the room specifically threatens their link with the male domain. In the darkness, the children must fix their eyes "on the faint light coming up the stairwell" in order to retain their connection with the male sphere.

The unfinished state of the room can be taken as an image of the undifferentiated consciousness of the children. Laird has not yet adopted a gender role associated with the father. Nor has

the narrator been forced to sever her connection to the father and take up an identity aligned with the mother. This hypothesis concerning her male orientation gains support from the nature of her nocturnal fantasies.

In the stories she tells herself late at night, she casts herself into the role of heroic subject. As male savior, she rescues people from a bombed building, shoots rabid wolves and rides "a fine horse spiritedly down the main streets" (113). Yet nobody except a *male*, "King Billy," ever rode a horse down the street (114). Before her subjectivity has been constituted, her body fought over and conquered, these dreams of male heroism seem attainable.

By the end of the story, however, her gender role has been established. This psychic division is replicated on the level of a spatial division, signalling the children's acquisition of gendered subjectivity. The bedroom is divided into two halves—one for the boy, the other, for the girl. Even the stories the narrator tells herself have altered. The plots start off in the old way, but then "things would change around, and instead, somebody would be rescuing me" (126). No longer the valiant hero, she becomes the victim in need of rescue.

Further proof of the narrator's initial alignment with the father lies in her assurance that she is his "hired man." During the day, rather than help her mother in the house—a job she abhors—she assists her father in looking after his captives. While watering the foxes, secure in her position, she looks scornfully upon her little brother's efforts to assist. Too small to handle adult tools, Laird toddles along with his pitiful gardening can—an overtly phallic object. In boasting that she "had the real watering can, my father's" (114), the narrator further emphasizes her belief that she has access, not to the father's actual member, but to the privileged symbolic system aligned with the phallus.²

By aligning herself with her father, the narrator thus accrues a measure of the status associated with the set of signifiers which attend the phallus, including "law," "money," "power," "knowledge," "plentitude," "authoritative-vision," etc. (Silverman 191).

As a result of this access to a particular set of signifiers, her relationship with her father differs dramatically from the connection she has with her mother. The contrast can be best understood within the inside/outside paradigm. Father and

daughter engage in the context of outer space—space that is “structured, interpreted and rendered meaningful by social discourse produced by the system of intellectual and cultural traditions” (Forsyth 335). The narrator literally joins her father on the outside (the out of doors) where they do work that is “ritualistically important” (117).

The relationship the narrator has with her mother, on the other hand, contrasts sharply with the silent, disciplined relationship she has with her father. Once again, to use the inside/outside paradigm, the association between mother and daughter, which occurs within the house, reflects the qualities of “inner” space. Louise Forsyth explains that “inner” space is also the realm of “the imaginary, of spirituality, of memory” (Forsyth 335). The narrator enters this space when she tells herself stories, and the mother, in sharing her memories with her daughter, also enters this space (115).

The mother does not belong to the powerful ruling elite, the patriarchy. Thus, she cannot control her daughter by utilizing the strategy available to the male. Whereas work done out of doors is “ritualistically important” or *real*, work performed indoors is “endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing” (117). For this reason, the mother treats her daughter as a fellow prisoner and their association is characterized by speech and openness.

At bottom, the separation between inner and outer space is arbitrary. No undisputed boundary separates inside from outside or nature from culture, unless, as Derrida argues, “it is granted that the division between exterior and interior passes through the interior of the interior or the exterior of the exterior” (Derrida 1986: 103). That is to say, the supposed border which divides the space must either pass through the “inside” or the “outside.”

While the separation between inside and outside may be arbitrary, these divisions are upheld by the virtually intractable force of opinion and tradition. Moreover, as we shall see, the placement of specific objects within either space affords a tremendous amount of cultural information concerning power relations. For instance, in exchange for the pelts, the family receives calendars. As the narrator explains, the Hudson’s Bay company or the Montreal Fur Traders supplied them with “heroic calendars to hang on both sides of the kitchen door” (111). At first, in the context of the discourse of production,

calendars seem out of place. Why does the narrator not refer to the receipt of a more logical item such as money? Yet upon closer examination, calendars prove to be an apt symbol, one which, like the word "raised," underscores a connection between the father's economic occupation as a farmer and his role as a producer of gendered subjects.

For one thing, the placement of the calendars on *both* sides of the kitchen door links the father's work, the production of animals, to the domestic sphere (the kitchen being the area within the home most closely connected to females). Secondly, mimicking the device of *mise en abîme* (the story which tells a story about telling a story, ad infinitum), the calendars not only "speak" as a result of their placement on the kitchen door, but they also tell a story by way of their depiction of the colonization in the northern wilderness.

The calendars depict nature being conquered by male adventurers in all their plumed, flag-planting majesty: territory is claimed and controlled. This depiction, in turn, recalls culture's age-old project of mastery over nature. Furthermore, the opposition between culture and nature illustrated by the calendar is closely aligned to a more general, cultural opposition between male and female.

Derrida argues that throughout history nature has been opposed to a chain of cultural institutions. Moreover, as Derrida and other critics have pointed out, these institutions have been traditionally aligned with the male, while the realm of the natural has been long associated with the female.³ Thus, by placing the calendars on both sides of the kitchen door, the aperture of the female domain, and by supplementing this with an illustration of the colonization of the wilderness, the calendars underscore the correspondence between the colonization of nature and the colonization of gendered subjects—specifically female subjects.

Finally, the natives within the calendar illustration, who bend their backs to the portage, have, like the foxes, been co-opted into the cultural project. Both foxes and natives exemplify bodies named by the discourse of production. The farmer transforms the foxes into "pelts" just as the early explorers transform the indigenous people into "savages" by imposing limited interpretations of their beings upon them. Both farmer

and explorer reduce bodies, fragment them into raw material and conscript them into the service of production.

Thus the seemingly insignificant detail of the placement of the calendar with its depiction of the colonization of the wilderness provides a diachronic perspective of the farmer's activities—a perspective which enables one to see that the enclosure of the foxes' bodies and the bodies of the other family members (who also "inhabit a world . . . [their] father made for them" [114]), replicates our forefather's enclosure of the feminine wilderness. Moreover, the calendar solidifies the connection, first established through the use of the word "raising," between the two types of production: farming and the raising of gendered adults.

Slowly but surely, as a result of these spatial arrangements, the narrator's position on the outside—her tenuous alignment with the male—is threatened. The first threat is delivered by the father's hired hand, Henry Bailey. After the foxes are skinned, Bailey takes a sackful of their bloody bodies and swipes at the narrator, saying "Christmas present" (111). This gesture subtly suggests a connection between the narrator's current fate and that of the foxes. Throughout the story, Bailey relishes the prospect of the narrator's acquisition of her gender role with its concomitant enforcement of subjugation to the male. When he comes across the narrator and her brother fighting, Bailey laughs again, saying, "Oh, that there Laird's gonna show you, one of these days!" (119).

Yet another threat arrives in the form of a feed salesman. The father introduces his daughter to the salesman as a hired man. The salesman responds according to the dictates of culture: no female is allowed on the outside. He reacts to the threat of her presence by treating the father's remark as a joke: "could of fooled me," he says, "I thought it was only a girl" (116).⁴

Other challenges to the narrator's connection to the father and her right to occupy the male "outside" space are launched from within the household itself. Female family members begin to coerce the narrator.⁵ Efforts to restrict her behaviour occur at every level of existence. For example, her grandmother tells her, "girls don't slam doors like that" (control of her movement through space); "girls keep their knees together when they sit down" (control of the body); and when she asks a question, she

is told "that's none of girls' business" (control of consciousness itself) [119].

In a similar bid for control, the narrator's mother confronts the father in front of the barn one fall evening, demanding that he relinquish his right to the girl's labour. The mother explains that, according to his law, the child should remain with her inside the house. In confronting the father at the barn, the mother transgresses the culturally established boundary between inside and outside. The narrator remarks on the scandal, noting how unusual it was to see her mother down at the barn (116). From her privileged, male-vantage point, the narrator looks on her mother in the same way she looks on the foxes. The narrator does not comprehend that the hostility she sees in the foxes' "malevolent faces" (115) is a response to their enforced captivity. Similarly, her mother's behaviour is interpreted, not as an expression of frustration and disappointment, or loneliness, but as a manifestation of innate wickedness and petty tyranny (118).

Ultimately, the narrator gives way to the variety of pressures directed at her. Once again, the two systems of production are shown to be linked: at the same time as the horses are butchered, the children's gender roles are fixed. The slaying of the horses recalls the initial butchering of the foxes. In effect, both horses and foxes are part of the chain of production, with the horses' bodies filling a crucial gap in the system. To ensure the continuation of the process, the foxes must be fed, and they are fattened on the bodies of the horses.

As I have suggested above, by drawing attention to the use of such words as "raised," to the father's role as the warden of the foxes, and to the placement of the calendars on both sides of the kitchen door, the cycle of production on the farm parallels the production of gendered subjects within the family. The familial discourse—a discourse which is "absolutely central to the perpetuation of the present, phallogocentric order"—must also be fed (Silverman 182); it too requires bodies.

Understandably, the narrator neglects to mention the butchering of the horses. She represses the information until the end of the story, claiming that she merely "forgot to say what the foxes were fed." More likely, her desire to omit the information is connected to her wish to leave the image of her father untarnished. She has a vested interest in preserving the white-wash that protects the powerful figure to whom she is allied.

Perhaps she believed that a denial of the operation would ensure her protection. With the butchering of the horses, Henry Bailey reappears, as does the initial menace inherent in Bailey's "joke," swiping at the protagonist with the sack of dead foxes.

When they learn that the butchering will take place, the narrator and her brother make their way to the stable, where they find Bailey "looking at his collection of calendars." The reappearance of the calendars recalls the initial discussion concerning the placement of the calendars on the kitchen door and the significance of their portrayal of the colonization of the wilderness.

Unlike the calendars in the family kitchen, however, Bailey's calendars are "tacked up behind the stalls" in a part of the stable the mother "had probably never seen" (120). Bailey's calendars are hidden from the mother for good reason: they are almost certainly pornographic. At this point the link between the calendar and the colonization of female bodies becomes explicit: the father's "stable"—a pen for livestock—becomes a pen for Bailey's pin-up girls, women who have received a specific projection of male desire.

In keeping with this brutal character, Bailey treats the butchering of the first horse, Mack, as a bit of fun. When the narrator asks if he is going to shoot the horse, Bailey breaks into a song about "darkies": "Oh, there's no more work, for poor uncle Ned, he's gone where the good darkies go" (120). In effect, foxes, savages, horses, and now "darkies" fall under the category of those bodies supposedly aligned with nature. When there is no more work for a fox, a horse, or a Black, in the terms outlined by the discourse of production, they are condemned to death. The "pen" of the patriarchal, capitalist institution has the power to inscribe and erase each and every one of them.

Despite Bailey's enjoyment of power, it is the father who ultimately shoots the horse. Bailey laughs as the horse kicks its legs in the air "as if Mack had done a trick for him" (122). The image of the horse's death has tremendous impact upon the narrator. In the midst of other thoughts, the memory intrudes upon her consciousness; she sees "the easy practiced way her father raised the gun, and hears Henry laughing when Mack kicked his legs in the air" (123). Bailey's laughter is particularly unnerving because it fully exposes his delight in power based on sheer inequality.

The narrator recognizes this as an abuse of power, not due to any innate feminine instincts, but as a result of her own experience. She, too, lorded power over an innocent victim; when Laird was younger, she told him to climb to the top beam in the barn. "Young and obedient," as trusting as the horse led to slaughter, Laird did as he was told. When her parents rushed to the scene, her mother wept, asking her why she had not washed him. Perhaps as a result of her mother's distress, the narrator's behaviour later fills her with regret. She felt a weight in her stomach, the "sadness of unexorcised guilt" (123).

In addition to finding the display of power distasteful, after the shooting the narrator can no longer continue to separate her father from his hired man.⁶ After the first shooting, her father's "easy" practiced movements and the hired man's laughter coalesce. The white-wash dissolves. The father loses his innocence. On some level, the narrator realizes that it was never her mother who would "act out of perversity . . . to try her power" but her father, the person she had trusted all along (118). However, it is only when the men try to shoot the second horse, Flora, that she radically breaks from her male-identified position.

In many respects, Flora resembles the spirited horse of the narrator's nocturnal fantasies. When the men try to pen her in, to use her for their own, limited ends, the mare makes a run between Bailey and the father. For the first time, an inmate dares attempt to escape. Immediately the father calls to his daughter, telling her to shut the gate and lock the horse in. Yet, instead of carrying out his instructions, she opens the gate "as wide as she could" (125). Without deliberating, she frustrates her father's project of separating inside from outside and she challenges his unquestioned right to legislate who moves across these borders.

Laird, watching his sister's scandalous behaviour, cannot comprehend why she disobeys her father. When the men swing by in their truck, he begs them to take him along. As they lift him into the truck, the little boy becomes a man: he joins the hunting party. Upon his return, he brandishes the streak of blood on his arm, behaving as if he just beheaded a lion instead of shooting a geriatric horse. No matter, the mark of blood and the domination of the Other continues to function as a crucial element in the rites of manhood. The boy cements his alliance with the father on the basis of their mutual triumph over nature.

The narrator, however, distanced from the father's activities, looks upon the spectacle and sees it for the sad charade it is. She knows that there is no longer any viable distinction to be made between nature and culture—in this case, wilderness and civilization—and that, when these distinctions are made, they are imposed by more powerful forces upon the weaker. After helping the mare to escape, she sums up the hopelessness of the situation:

Flora would not really get away. They would catch up with her in the truck. Or if they did not catch her this morning somebody would see her and telephone us this afternoon or tomorrow. *There was no wild country here for her to run to, only farms.* (125) [emphasis mine]

At night, the heroes return to assemble around the table. Laird denounces his sister, telling everyone that she let the horse escape. Rather than deny the accusation, the narrator bursts into tears and she fully expects to be sent from the table for her unseemly, "feminine" behaviour. But her behaviour is taken for granted. Yet why should she be asked to leave the room? The kitchen is to be her domain, after all.

Relishing his newly acquired power, Laird points out that she is crying, but the father tells him, "never mind." For the first time, the family treats her as a female. Her father shows her the same kind of consideration he showed her mother the night the latter confronted him at the barn. He listened to the mother's complaints, "politely as he would to a salesman or a stranger, but with an air of waiting to get on with his *real* work" (117) [emphasis mine].

As the narrator herself predicts, her refusal to participate in the father's project of spatial control ultimately severs her connection to him. After she defies him she realizes "he was not going to trust me anymore, he would know that I was not entirely on his side." The use of the word "side" further emphasizes the spatial transformation whereby the narrator permanently aligns herself with Flora. (The horse is aptly named, suggesting a relationship to nature and, by extension, the female.) Like her mother and the other natural bodies (foxes, savages, horses, and darkies), she becomes "unreal." The father has only to seal her fate by naming her and he does so "with resignation and even good humour" (127).⁷

Assuming his right as the giver of names, a male privilege which extends as far back as the first male—Adam—the father pronounces the words which “absolved and dismissed” the protagonist for good: “she’s only a girl.” The act of naming constitutes yet another form of enclosing. However, in order for these words to have any power over her, she must accept the name—which she does, saying, “I didn’t protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true” (127). If being a girl means refusing to sanction violence and the abuse of power, then she must indeed be a girl. In the end, brother and sister take up their “rightful” positions, acquiescing to the pressures which divide them physically and psychically. The cultural discourse has been inculcated. A revolution in the cycle of production is complete.

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One final note. Although this is the ostensible conclusion, the reader must keep in mind that the story is not told by the child. The mature narrator speaks from the margins (space that is not rigidly monitored), the only position where the cultural project of production remains scrutible. Thus, like the hostile foxes, who even after death continue to exude a strong primitive odour “of the fox itself” (112), the narrator’s identity has not been completely fixed by an ideology which accords her a role and set of behaviour on the basis of her sex. The consistent tension between the bitter, mournful adult voice and the child’s idealistic perception suggests that she continues to resist and criticize the patriarchal system which names her.

NOTES

¹ Note that the father’s favorite book is *Robinson Crusoe*. As Ian Watt points out in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964): 60-66, Defoe’s works mark a tremendous shift in societal values—a shift which sees the weakening of group relations in favour of the rugged individual. Characters like Moll Flanders and Robinson Crusoe are typical in that they are motivated by economic interests. Robinson Crusoe, the economic man *par excellence*, is an apt hero for the narrator’s “tirelessly inventive” capitalistic father.

² In particular, the narrator says “she had the *real* watering can” [emphasis mine]. Throughout the text, the word “real” is used to point out the distinction between the male and female spheres of activity; the word “real” is also linked, for this reason, to the inside/outside motif discussed earlier. Kaja Silverman

asserts that the cultural network reifies the father "by inserting his 'name' into a signifying chain in which it enjoys close proximity to other privileged signifiers."

³ A detailed discussion of this argument can be found in Sherry Ortner's essay, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford UP, 1974).

⁴ As noted above, the male sphere constitutes all that is "real" or serious. Based on this division, it is understandable why the girl's presence is treated as a joke, and why she herself feels that becoming a girl "was a joke on me." Split off from the male domain, female identity cannot be aligned with the real, and must therefore be the opposite of real, namely a joke. Throughout the story, humour is revealed to be both a strategy used to keep women in their place and the place for women—the realm of the non-serious or non-real.

⁵ The use of other women to enforce the patriarchal discourse—essentially control of the indigenous by members of their own group—is one of the more distasteful features of the patriarchal institution.

⁶ As the father's "hired man," Bailey is in fact a metonymic extension of the father. He is literally a metonym: hired *hand*.

⁷ Like his hired man, the father also indulges in the humour of the oppressor—the humour Bailey displayed when he brushed the narrator with the sack of carcasses, and when he laughed at Mack's dying throes. The father's humour is even more closely related to the humour displayed by the feed salesman, who laughed at the thought of a girl being a hired man; the father actually borrows his very words.

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