

The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*

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Abstract

This essay examines scholarly discourses about embodiment, and their increasing scholarly currency, in relation to two novels by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Like many of Atwood's other works, *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) are explicitly concerned with the complexities of body image. More specifically, however, these novels usefully exemplify her attempt to demystify the female form. In the following pages, I investigate Atwood's treatment of the mind/body dualism and analyse the ways in which she responds to, and resists, its destructive effects. Using contemporary theory, moreover, I show how Atwood deals with the concept of female space, as well as the 'space' of the female body itself. I also consider Atwood's representation of the female appetite, taking into account its relationship to power and identity, and foregrounding the cultural meaning of eating disorders. Taken together, these subject matters demonstrate how the body 'feeds' identity and how a woman's corporeal experience directly influences her cultural experience. Through a close engagement with recent theories of embodiment, I analyse the extent to which Atwood's fiction might dismantle culturally-encoded concepts of femininity and propose a useful corrective to traditional readings of the female body in which the re-embodiment of the self is equated to a re-embodiment of culture.

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In 1990, sociologist Arthur Frank declared: 'Bodies are in, in academia as well as in popular culture' (131). Three years later, David Morgan and Sue Scott in their study *Body Matters: Essays on the Sociology of the Body* reaffirm his statement: 'since we first began the process of editing this book there has been a veritable explosion of feminist work on "the body"' (3). Almost two decades have elapsed since 1990, but the continuing proliferation of scholarship based around issues relating to the body means that Frank's assertion still rings true today. While there are multiple explanations for what Kathy Davis has termed the 'body craze', it is ascribable, in no small way, to the work of feminism: 'feminism is held responsible for putting the body on the intellectual map' (1).

Relegated to the realms of biology, the body has, until recently, been a site of cultural debate largely ignored by sociologists. Lurking in the background of social science, this 'absent presence' was, and occasionally is, disparaged in favour of 'the mind'.² This mind/body dichotomy has pervaded western thought for centuries. Descartes' famous dictum, '*Cogito ergo sum*', established dualism as a distinct philosophy; however, the tradition dates back much further and is deeply rooted in early

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² This term, 'absent presence' has been adopted by a number of sociologists to describe the treatment of 'the body' in the social sciences. Kathy Davis attributes the term to Chris Shilling. 1993. *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage.

Christian theology.³ Cartesian dualism partitions human experience into two separate categories: the spiritual and the bodily. In this equation, the body is merely an external vessel for the rational, objective mind. Susan Bordo vividly captures this mind/body struggle in *Unbearable Weight* (2003):

[W]hat remains the constant element . . . is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, freedom...) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization. (5)

This self/other dualism is likewise reflected in the constructed oppositions of culture and nature, and reason and emotion. If the mind is allied with culture and reason, then it follows that the body is associated with all that is 'other'. Historically, women have been defined by their 'biological potentiality', and the female reproductive system has worked to reduce women to the sum of their child-bearing parts (Morgan and Scott: 11). If woman is inextricably associated with the body, and the body is regarded as being somehow inferior to the mind – the carnal flesh to which the elevated mind is shackled – then woman surely *is* inferior.

Considering this inherently sexist construction of gender, it is no surprise that the body is central to feminist debate. Margaret Sanger wrote in 1922 that '[n]o woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body. . . . It is for women the key to liberty' (533). The female body, as a site of oppression, has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women. Medical discourse throughout the centuries has been instrumental in the construction of the female body as naturally unstable, deficient, and unruly (see Davis: 6). Nineteenth-century medicine insisted women were slaves to their uterus and ovaries, semi-permanent invalids whose every ailment was the result of a reproductive disorder (King: 17). Indeed, as Williams and Bendelow explain, it was feared that the over-exertion of women's brains would 'atrophy the uterus' and hinder women's reproductive destiny (115). The early 1960s heralded the introduction of oral contraceptives, a breakthrough for women in their struggle to reclaim their bodies.⁴ Initially, however, proof of marriage and a husband's written consent was mandatory for women who requested the birth control pill in Britain and the United States (Marks: 202).

Even so, physical control over the female form was not, and is not, limited to the regulation of female reproduction. As Kate Conboy *et al* suggest:

Just as man's civilizing impetus transforms wildlife, land, and vegetation into territories to tame and control, so too does it render woman a form of nature to

³ The writings of first-century philosopher Philo Judaeus were very influential in the development of early Christian church doctrines. The long-standing tradition of the mind/body dichotomy is an area which far exceeds the limitations of this article. Nancy Tuana provides a framework for understanding the mind/body tradition in *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁴ The introduction of the oral contraceptive offered women an unprecedented amount of bodily freedom. However it can also be argued that the arrival of the pill caused men to renounce their contraceptive responsibilities, and locked women further into male-defined sexual practices. Lara V. Marks, in *Sexual Chemistry*, provides a broad and in-depth study into the reception of the pill.

apprehend, dominate, and defeat. In fact, culture has, variously, valued supposedly 'natural' feminine bodily characteristics (narrow waists, small feet, long hair, for example), which have required the most unnatural maintenance (corsets, foot-binding, products for straightening or de-tangling). (2)

Femininity is supposedly the 'natural' essence of womanhood itself; to be feminine is to be a woman. By contrast, Conboy *et al* argue that femininity is just another social mechanism which is based on male desires and used to curtail the freedom of women.

That bodies matter is axiomatic in feminist debate – a debate that is as prevalent in academia as it is in popular culture. The manner in which female bodies are unequally and negatively imbued with meaning has incited a number of feminist authors to attempt to decode the female body, both critiquing it and liberating it from traditional, patriarchal formulations. Indeed, as Maggie Humm suggests, 'it is in feminist fiction . . . that new accounts of the female body, and its potential cultural representations, amount to a feminist rewriting of culture' (124).

One author who provides an astute and tangible analysis of the female body as it exists within our culture is Margaret Atwood.⁵ While not her only works to address the complexities of body image, her novels *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) are clear examples of Atwood demystifying the female form. In this essay I investigate Atwood's treatment of the mind/body dualism, and analyse the ways in which she responds to and resists its destructive effects. More specifically, I explore how Atwood deals with the concept of female space and the 'space' of the female body itself. I also mean to probe the female appetite as it appears in Atwood's novels, taking into account its relationship to power and identity, and foregrounding the cultural meaning of eating disorders. Taken together, these subject matters demonstrate how the body 'feeds' identity and how a woman's corporeal experience directly influences her cultural experience. Through these novels, Atwood dismantles the culturally-encoded concept of femininity and proposes a re-reading of the female body; women must re-embody themselves and consequently re-embody culture.

Body and Mind

The above revelation, taken from Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, typifies the dualistic logic that insists our bodies are entirely separate from our *true* inner selves. It is worth noting that the statement is delivered by a male character, Leonard Slank. It incites a response which suggests that his mortification stems not from the fact that desire has been based solely on the body, but rather that it has been based on *his* body: "What did you want," Ainsley asked sweetly, "from me?" Evidently, Len considers the objectification of women to be perfectly natural, but for *him* to be thus degraded, reduced to nothing but 'body', is outrageous.

The mind/body dualism is central to the lives of Atwood's female protagonists, heavily influencing their embodied experiences. Joan Foster in the *Lady Oracle* and Marian MacAlpin of *The Edible Woman* live within a phallogentric society and are, as

⁵ Here, I am not suggesting that Atwood is the only author to consider women's bodies. Neither am I suggesting that her writing is only, or predominantly, about women's bodies. She explores a multitude of cultural myths and philosophies in her work, adopting a wide range of generic forms. However, for the purpose of this article, discussion is limited to Atwood's consideration of the body.

Humm suggests, ‘torn between unconscious feminist questions and the stereotypical answers which society provides’ (127). They are repeatedly confronted with culturally gendered distinctions that limit their existence to the corporeal. In a conversation with her Polish Count lover, Joan questions the binary constraints that dictate she is solely body:

“You have the body of a Goddess”, the Polish Count used to say . . .

“Do I have the head of one too?” I replied once, archly.

“Do not make such jokes”, he said. “You must believe me. Why do you refuse to believe in your own beauty?” (142)

If the reader is unclear about gendered dualisms, the Polish Count, who believes that for women physical abnormality is worse than idiocy, goes on to remark: “‘Ah, but the mystery of man is of the mind . . . whereas that of the woman is of the body’” (166). This works to illuminate an earlier statement that Joan makes to Arthur: “‘You’re always telling me women should become whole people through meaningful work’” (36). Here, after all, it is implied that women are incomplete, and will remain so, until they acquire ‘the mind’; according to the Count, of course, ‘the mind’ is thoroughly incompatible with femininity.

Such a rejection is alluded to in Joan’s depiction of Diana’s statue at Ephesus. As Goddess of, amongst other things, fertility and childbirth, the statue symbolizes the essence of femininity itself; it is, according to Molly Hite, ‘a paradigm of the patriarchally controlled female body’ (135):

She had a serene face, perched on top of a body shaped like a mound of grapes. She was draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws: little breasts at the top and bottom, big ones around the middle. The nipples were equipped with sprouts, but several of the breasts were out of order.

I stood licking my ice-cream cone, watching the goddess coldly. Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not any more. My ability to give was limited, I was not inexhaustible. I was not serene, not really. I wanted things, for myself. (253)

By using comic analogies which firmly ground the Goddess in ‘reality’, Joan’s description completely undermines the familial virtues for which the Goddess is traditionally worshipped. Her serene face is perched on top of her body rather than being a part of it, emphasizing that the body is the female’s primary site. With this in mind, Joan detaches herself from the figure, acknowledging her own limits and desires. Her assertion is a protest against the society that situates her as a reproductive machine. For, as the food imagery and Joan’s unromantic terms suggest, to be endlessly giving, to nourish and sustain others is simply to be edible. In *The Hungry Self* (1994), Kim Chernin’s account of one woman’s consumption by her family resonates soundly with Joan’s narrative: “‘I always thought of myself as having ten breasts”, a woman tells me, in her characteristically vivid way. “One for every member of the family. And a few left over for the neighborhood”. But now, she admits, she has begun to feel that “something is eating” at her’ (24-25). The something ‘eating’ at this woman, which Joan also

recognizes, is a society that views the female body as consumable. Women are not inexhaustible bodies and through Joan's resistance, Atwood is able to defy convention.

Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, also attempts to resist the patriarchally encoded female body. When Marian gets engaged to her partner, Peter, her family respond by echoing patriarchal concerns about women and education:

[T]heir fears about the effects of her university education, never stated but always apparent, had been calmed at last. They had probably been worried she would turn into a high-school teacher or a maiden aunt . . . or that she would undergo some shocking physical transformation, like developing muscles and a deep voice or growing moss But now, their approving eyes said, she was turning out all right after all. (174)

Her family clearly endorse the dominant dualistic ideology that oppresses women. Marian, nevertheless, is endeavouring to emancipate herself from such victimization by disregarding her *essential* body and thus empowering her mind. Marian's alienation from her body permeates the novel. It is perhaps most patent in the disrupted narrative, which shifts from first- to third-person narration in order to convey Marian's increasing distance from her somatic self. Marian's disassociation is reminiscent of the attitudes of some early second-wave feminists, to whom it seemed necessary to minimize, or even ignore, their bodies and their maternal possibilities (see Brook: 8). Adrienne Rich argues that '[w]omen are controlled by lashing us to our bodies' (qtd. in Brook: 8).⁶ Theoretically, by erasing the body, women can evade patriarchal control. As Marian comes to learn, however, the body will not be disposed of so easily. In a scene symptomatic of Marian's corporeal estrangement, her body is forced to make its presence known:

After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! (70)

What her body is crying out for is acceptance; it refuses to be dismissed. In abstaining from certain foods, Marian faces 'each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its mind' (178). Chernin observes how it becomes increasingly apparent that 'both the body and the feelings of this woman have gained autonomy from her conscious intentions . . . and that they will continue to behave in an erratic manner until she acknowledges and integrates them' (1994: 67). Indeed, it is only once Marian has assimilated mind and body that she retrieves her narrative power. Marian's response to gendered binaries is to detach herself from her body; by enabling Marian's body to protest against that detachment, Atwood denounces the repressive dichotomies that order society. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott argue that '[m]eaningfulness requires that bodies are not separated off from those who inhabit them Bodies have no meaning, no significance apart from cultural context; social situation and interaction with others' (21).

⁶ While Rich acknowledges the oppressive control the female body endures under patriarchy, she is eager to positively reclaim the body of mother for women. Brook outlines clearly the alternative feminist approaches to the body.

Atwood indicates that the solution is *not* to accept and adapt oneself to repressive culturally-defined conventions, but to re-write them.

Marian's binary view is not restricted to *her* body; she frequently considers friends and colleagues in these terms, particularly the heavily-pregnant Clara, whom she saw as 'a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead, a shape that had made her think of a queen-ant, bulging with the burden of an entire society, a semi-person' (115). Clara's mind, in Marian's eyes, is being overcome by her bulbous body and Marian finds it increasingly difficult to communicate with Clara 'in her condition' (30). In *The Woman in the Body* (1987), Emily Martin investigates, among other things, the language used to articulate reproductive experience. For example, pregnancy, rather than a state of being in its own right, is a medical condition, an ailment women must endure as means to an end; it is something you go through or that happens to you, not an action you take (77). Marian, and to an extent Clara, subscribe to this way of thinking. Marian judges Clara to have succumbed to the demands of her body and thus forfeited her mind:

During the later, more vegetable stage of Clara's pregnancy she [Marian] had tended to forget that Clara had a mind at all or any perceptive faculties above the merely sentient and sponge-like, since she had spent most of her time being absorbed in, or absorbed by, her tuberous abdomen. (130)

Once she has given birth, Marian welcomes back the 'real' mentally-aware Clara. Through her pregnancies Clara allegedly fulfils her deepest femininity. By describing Clara's condition as vegetative and sponge-like, Marian is not only conveying her own divisionary response to the mind/body dichotomy, but also demeaning and resisting that patriarchal concept of femininity.

As aforementioned, second-wave feminism witnessed the increase in the number of women who believed that combining maternity with intellectual activity was impossible. In an interview for the *Paris Review* in 1965, Simone de Beauvoir expressed: 'I have never regretted not having children insofar as what I wanted to do was write' (qtd. in Brook: 24). In so doing, she demonstrates the force of the mind/body dichotomy and the apparent mutual exclusivity of production and reproduction. The pregnant body, it would seem, is very much located on the natural side of the nature/culture divide, which is perhaps why the pregnant woman in the workplace inspires such contention. On this matter, Martin observes:

[O]ne cannot help but see the clash with which the two worlds, meant to be kept ideologically separate, collide. A pregnant working woman is an embarrassment, an offense. She is threatened with loss of job or career, or it is assumed she will quit; she is told she never would have been hired if her supervisor had been warned, she is told she cannot have it both ways. (197)

Woman's natural reproductive capability is the predominant reason she is designated as body and not mind. Thus, the pregnant woman in the workplace flagrantly disregards the nature/culture divide. The attitude of which Martin speaks is undoubtedly discernable in Marian's workplace Seymour Surveys, a market research company that 'regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty' (24). After formally announcing her engagement at her

office party, it is made clear to Marian that she is expected to leave her job regardless of her own preference:

Marian knew, from rumour and from the banishment of a typist just after she had begun to work at the office, that Mrs Bogue preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past. Newly-weds, she had been heard to say, were inclined to be unstable. (168)

Atwood presents such an openly oppressive culture in order that it might be refuted by both her protagonist and her readers. Marian's journey of self-discovery arises from consciously recognizing the repressive cultural constructs that manage her life, and then finding the strength to dispel them.

Clearly, in *The Edible Woman*, the work place is one of those spaces that society designates as off-limits to the pregnant female; here, after all, she blurs the boundaries between nature and culture. The problem, as stated by Martin, is that 'women have the potential for both ways in them all the time' (197). The pregnant woman is the ultimate *good* woman, conforming to patriarchal feminine ideals. However, as Hite states, 'goodness is a function of limits' (1988: 136). She *is* performing her maternal destiny, though in all her 'naturalness' the pregnant woman must remain within culturally-defined boundaries. In a value system concerned above all with controlling manifestations of the feminine, too much *goodness* is no good at all.

Female Space

The pregnant body is an exaggeration of patriarchal demands; another woman who exceeds those demands is the fat lady. In a society that expects slenderness, her excess weight marks her as an undisciplined woman, a non-conformist who occupies more than her allotted space. By diminishing the female form, patriarchy diminishes the woman, promoting devices such as the corset to imprison her in the feminine ideal. Women are expected to adapt themselves to masculine desires, as exemplified by Marian's flatmate Ainsley, who creates a new version of herself that is youthful, demure and subservient, to suit the desires of Len. Those women who fail to adapt are, put simply, not women. Overweight in her youth, Joan explains: 'Some employers welcomed me: I was as cheap as a woman but didn't cause the disruption among male employees and customers other women did' (96). Exceeding her allocated female space, Joan exceeds the cultural definitions of her gender and is thus not viewed as a woman. This is reaffirmed by her description of one of the other larger girls in school, who masculinizes her appearance and socializes with men: 'She was accepted by them, more or less, but as another boy. They didn't seem to think of her as a woman at all' (93). In her oversized body, Joan is completely desexualized: 'Though immersed in flesh, I was regarded as being above its desires, which of course was not true' (94). This confession resonates soundly with the mind/body dualism. Essentially, femininity is a straitjacket fashioned by patriarchy to police the female body and the space it occupies – an injustice to which Atwood is attuned in *Lady Oracle*. For Joan Foster, the space society demarcates for her is so restricting she cannot help but overflow; she does so literally, her heavy body spilling over its allocated space. This habit continues even after her weight-

loss: 'The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon' (214). As she obtains the 'right shape', she realizes she has the 'wrong past': 'I'd have to get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for myself, a more agreeable one' (141). In her search for a more acceptable self, Joan creates a number of identities, all of which signify an attempt to meet the demands of the feminine ideal. As she attempts to contain herself, to conform, Joan is visited throughout the novel by a series of 'other' female bodies: the astral figure of her mother, a creature composed entirely of her 'lost' flesh, and the circus Fat Lady adorned in a pink fluffy skirt and glittering tiara. Hite asserts: 'Clearly these visitants represent aspects of Joan that exceed the societal roles to which she is trying to conform' (1988: 137). Just as Marian's body protests against its dismissal, so too do these bodies protest, transgressing boundaries and refusing to stay in their place. As the Fat Lady floats into the arena during the game of ice-hockey, Arthur and Joan are watching on television, the reader is faced with the clearest example of the female body forgetting her place:

The U.S. team scooted across the bottom of the screen like a centipede, but no one paid any attention, they were all distracted by the huge pink balloon that bobbed with such poor taste above their heads.

...The Fat Lady kicked her skates feebly; her tights and the huge moon of her rump were visible. Really it was an outrage. 'They've gone for the harpoon gun', I heard the commentator say. They were going to shoot her down in cold blood, explode her, despite the fact that she had now burst into song. (274)

The Fat Lady has escaped her own space and invaded masculine territory. As Hite describes it, '[t]he Fat Lady, as Joan conceives her, is the embodiment – literally – of the female potential for excess, of the threat that unutilized, unchecked femininity will overflow boundaries, obliterating distinctions and violating proprieties' (1992: 139). Thus, the only response the onlookers deem appropriate is to maim the Fat Lady for her trespass. This episode symbolizes the patriarchal fear of unchecked femininity and the need to cut the female body down to size. The tendency, in this novel, for 'other' female bodies to materialize unexpectedly is Atwood's response to the suffocating limitations of society's definition of woman. That these bodies appear when Joan is trying to fit the feminine mould is symbolic of the female body rebelling against its confinement.⁷

Necessitated by the gendered division of nature and culture, it is apparent that society designates some areas masculine and others feminine. The Fat Lady at the hockey game is an apparent example of the female body out of her space and leaking into hostile masculine terrain. That said, are culturally-ordained female spaces less hostile? Atwood's response is discernable in her illustration of Marian's visit to a beauty salon, a female space dedicated to the presentation of the female body:

⁷ *Lady Oracle* is a novel with multiple narratives; the realist narrative spilling over into the gothic genre and mirroring the various female bodies that transgress their boundaries. It is arguable that the realist narrative is representative of a reality in which patriarchy dominates; thus, as the culturally-defined feminine ideal cannot accommodate 'woman', neither can the realism genre accommodate the narrative. This narrative device reinforces Atwood's critical response to society's demands on the female body; however the limitations of this article prevent me from exploring the matter further.

Marian had closed her eyes, leaning back against the operating-table, while her scalp was soaped and scraped and rinsed. She thought it would be a good idea if they would give anaesthetics to the patients, just put them to sleep while all these necessary physical details were taken care of; she didn't enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an object. (209)

Her discomfort is palpable; she goes on to confess that 'her whole body felt curiously paralysed'. The narrator's surgical, somewhat violent description is incongruous with an experience that is supposed to be pleasant and relaxing; this incongruity mirrors the incompatibility between patriarchal femininity and women's own feelings. As Hite argues, '[s]exuality is not the same as being sexy, desire is not the same as being desirable, and what women want is not entirely reducible to what men want in women' (1988: 123). Whilst waiting to be 'pronounced' dry, Marian observes the 'assembly-line of women' sitting decapitated by the metal mushroom-shaped hairdryers, an image that implies mindlessness. Marian's desire to be anaesthetized during the process reflects her awareness of such objectification but also her unwillingness to combat it, suppressing her feelings to enable her to accept her fate:

[S]he found herself shrugging mentally. After all, she had taken the leap, she had walked through the gilded chocolate-box door of her own *free will* and this was the consequence and she had better accept it. (10-11; emphasis added)

Interestingly, Marian considers herself to be acting of her own free will, despite the fact that it is Peter's prompting that causes her to venture into the salon without regard for her own comfort. In this episode, female space is not a place for women to fulfil their own desires, but a space created for women to fulfil the desires of men. Atwood's clinical treatment of the beauty salon is a reflection of the scrutiny patriarchy inflicts on the female body. The ostensibly headless bodies visually encapsulate the gendered mind/body dichotomy that is so central to women's oppression. They also cause Marian to question what she is trying to achieve: 'Was this what she was being pushed towards, this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical?' (210). While she resigns herself immediately to the necessity of endurance, her very questioning signals Marian's motion to change and indeed challenge patriarchal conventions of femininity.

Arguably, the beauty salon episode is an example of patriarchy encroaching on female space to control the female body. Marian and Joan are both extremely conscious of the heavy burden patriarchy forces upon their bodies. As the feminine ideal becomes increasingly confining, they imagine themselves disappearing. Sitting in the bath, Marian is suddenly overwhelmed by the fear that she is dissolving, 'coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle' (218). This image is initially introduced via a dream:

I [Marian] had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent. I had started towards the mirror to see what was happening to my face, but at that point I woke up. (43)

Marian goes on to confess that she doesn't usually remember her dreams, a point which only serves to highlight its significance; the dream is perhaps an allusion to an attempt by Marian's subconscious to warn her against the perils of patriarchal control. In response to this control, Marian attempts to remove her body from its patriarchal stronghold when she crawls under a bed to hide from 'the reverberating hot glare' of Peter, Len and Ainsley:

Though I was only two or three feet lower than the rest of them, I was thinking of the room as 'up there'. I myself was underground, I had dug myself a private burrow. I felt smug. (76)

Marian's behaviour is symptomatic of her endeavour to escape patriarchal surveillance and find a space of her own, an action which causes Peter to announce: "'The trouble with *you*," he said savagely, "you're just rejecting your femininity"' (80). To the reader it is evident that, despite her own disclaimer that femininity has nothing to do with it, Peter has accurately expressed the motivation for Marian's behaviour.

Joan, who figures herself as a 'huge featureless blur', can also be seen to reject her femininity: 'Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there, I was an accident; I'd heard her [Mother] call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me?' (78). Joan is a compulsive-eater; she eats to triumph over her mother, the embodiment of patriarchal social norms, and to guarantee her existence. As Susie Orbach explains in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978):

The resulting fat has the function of making the space for which women crave. . . . We want to look and be substantial. We want to be bigger than society will let us. We want to take up as much space as the other sex. (27)

For Joan, food is a device by which she can secure her space and evade reduction. Undeniably then, the concept of female space and the consumption of food are vitally connected; food and eating are thus situated as integral features of feminist corporeal discourse.

Food and Body

The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle each struggle with food; they both present symptoms of eating disorders: Marian cannot eat and Joan cannot stop. Chernin suggests that '[t]aken together, the slender self-effacing Marian and the fat, rebellious Lady Oracle form the poles that define our position as women in contemporary culture today, so far as the use of our body to express meaning is concerned' (1994: 72). No longer is the Western phenomenon of eating disorders interpreted as a reaction to the barrage of images of extreme slenderness promoted by the fashion industry and media (Palmer: 28). Rather feminists have come to understand the eating disorder, overwhelmingly a female problem, as a rebellion against culturally-defined experiences of womanhood. Orbach states that feminism 'has taught us that activities that appear to be self-destructive are invariably adaptations, attempts to cope with the world' (9). Anorexia and compulsive eating can thus be seen as purposeful acts, demonstrations either conscious or unconscious, against patriarchal constructions of femininity and women's lack of

corporeal power.

Marian's anorexia emerges when she and Peter are dining out.⁸ As the wedding approaches Marian feels herself, albeit subconsciously, being absorbed by Peter, whose power is manifest in his ability to eat, and indeed control, what Marian eats:

She had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her. It got rid of the vacillation she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. *But Peter could make up their minds right away.* (147; emphasis added)

Peter's dominance over Marian is writ large in their abstract discussion about the education of their future children and the manner in which, again, Peter makes up Marian's mind. Peter's condescension, his complete dismissal of Marian's opinions is explicit:

'Darling, you don't understand these things', Peter said; 'you've led a sheltered life' . . .
'But shouldn't they be given understanding, instead of...?'
He smiled indulgently. (147)

The ellipsis here captures Marian's inability to verbally confront her oppression, thus the onus is placed on her body. By the chapter's close, Marian pushes away her unfinished meal, marking the onset of her inability to eat. In so doing, she physically expresses her powerlessness *and* protests against it. Her non-eating typifies her lack of autonomy and yet in rejecting the steak Peter has chosen, she also rejects his ideals and the subservient marital role he intends for her. In other words, food and the body become the language with which Marian is able to communicate her resistance to dominant and reductive conventions of femininity.

Another woman fluent in the language of food and body is Joan. Joan's compulsive-eating is linked to her desire to get fat. Her large size is a deliberate and physical resistance against patriarchal constructions of femininity. In Joan's fat, argues Chernin, 'we are enabled to read many kinds of hostility and a great deal of emotional distress' (72). Joan's distress is clear when, after her dramatic weight-loss, she is sexually desirable for the first time. Her fat had meant that '[she] never developed the usual female fears'; it provided her with fleshy armour: 'I didn't experience men as aggressive lechers but as bashful, elusive creatures who could think of nothing to say to me and who faded at my approach' (140). However, her physical reduction exposes her to sexual depredations, gazes from 'strange men' who look at her 'like a dog eying a fire hydrant' (123). Joan's response to these leers is a longing to be fat again:

⁸ Whilst Marian's behaviour is widely accepted by critics as anorexic, it is salient that within the text, Atwood never applies this term to Marian or her behaviour. Given the popular acceptance of the term 'anorexia' in Western society, it is arguable that Atwood avoids the catch-all label in order to resist a singular definition of Marian, and thus encourage analysis of the eating-disorder as a corporeal language.

[I]t would be a disguise. I could be merely an onlooker again, with nothing too much expected of me. Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility I felt naked. (141)

According to Hite, 'Atwood's representation of the consequences attendant on a dramatic change in body size reveals graphically that for a woman in Western society, to be perceived as sexual is to be a potential victim' (1992: 138). As a thin woman, Joan retrospectively conceptualizes her fat as a form of sexual protection; it removed her from the category 'sexual object' and allowed her to function as *someone* rather than *something*. Her longing to be fat again cements the connection between compulsive-eating and woman's desire to rebel against her powerlessness.

Both Joan and Marian impart the hidden intentionality of compulsive eating and non-eating. Orbach underlines the importance of examining the process by which women learn this role: 'It is a complex and ironic process[;] for women are prepared for this life of inequality by other women who themselves suffer its limitations – their mothers' (28). Orbach suggests that women's relationship to food is an expression of the complex relationships between mothers and daughters, an argument supported by Chernin:

Indeed, the problem with female identity that most troubles us, and that is most disguised by our preoccupation with eating and body-size . . . has a great deal to do with being a daughter and knowing that one's life as a woman must inevitably reflect on the life of one's mother. (1986: 37)

Joan's troubled relationship with her mother characterizes the mother-daughter conflict that Orbach and Chernin describe. Joan's attempt to escape the fate of being her mother's daughter is articulated in the same language she uses to express all her anxieties about being a woman: food and body.

As aforementioned, Joan's mother personifies the feminine ideal. She is a wife and mother, maintains an immaculately tidy home and performs a rigorous beauty regime. Her socially acceptable life is disrupted by her fat daughter and thus, in a somewhat tyrannical manner, she begins a dietary campaign against her daughter to correct this anomaly. However, Joan will not succumb easily and what ensues is a battle of wills centred on food:

By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body. (69)

Joan eats to defy her mother and the social conventions she represents. She will not allow herself to be moulded into a socially acceptable product: 'I wasn't going to let myself be diminished, neutralized . . . I wouldn't ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful' (88). Instead, Joan compulsively eats and dresses conspicuously, provoking her mother to cry in desperation: "If I looked like you I'd hide in the cellar". For Joan, over-eating is a means by which she can reject her mother's role; but for Joan's mother, her proprietary interest in her daughter's body is an attempt to justify that role.

Indeed, '[f]or a daughter to be like her mother is', according to Orbach, 'a way to validate the mother's life' (29). Only after her mother's death, does Joan achieve clarity:

I knew that in my mother's view both I and my father had totally failed to justify her life the way she felt it should have been justified. She used to say that nobody appreciated her, and this was not paranoia. Nobody did appreciate her, even though she'd done the right thing, she had devoted her life to us [and] made her family her career as she had been told to do. (178)

In a powerful scene, Joan gorges herself on the entire contents of her deceased mother's refrigerator, expecting her mother to materialize disgusted by her gluttony. After she has abused her stomach to its limits, she vomits, as though purging herself of her mother's unfulfilled life. Through her body and the volume of food she consumes, Joan attempts to escape the limitations of femininity and to separate her fate from that of her mother.

For Joan, her mother epitomizes the oppressive social conventions she wishes to reject. In *The Edible Woman*, it is on her work colleagues that Marian projects her anxieties about being a woman in society. At her office party, as Marian spies 'the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs Gundridge's back by the top of her corset', she withdraws into convention by holding the body responsible for women's cultural oppression:

For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be – or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity. (167)

With profound perception, Marian imagines her colleagues as edible women: 'They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay' (166-67). Chernin suggests that '[i]n the equation Marian constructs, fat stands for maturity and maturity implies a meaningless existence' (1994: 69). Therefore, if Marian's body does not allow itself to mature, Marian can avoid becoming one of *them*, one of the edible women. Marian's inability to eat is an attempt to erase the body she shares with the women she observes; in this way, it represents an attempt to free herself from the femininity that suffocates her.

Eventually, Marian abandons her conventional blaming of the flesh and at the novel's coda, she regains her ability to eat. In a literal evocation of the edible woman, Marian bakes an enormous iced cake cast in a female figure. Now, fully conscious of the anxieties her body has been tacitly expressing, she offers the cake to Peter, who can be seen here as metonymically representative of his society:

'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you', she said. 'You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork', she added somewhat prosaically. (271)

Peter does not, cannot accept her substitute. He is unable to comprehend the meaning of her baked woman and therefore rapidly takes his leave. Suddenly Marian is overcome with hunger. She devours the cake in triumph; she is free to hunger, no longer alienated from her own body. Marian's sponge feast, to use Humm's terms, is a 'cannibalism of the female stereotype', a conscious rejection of patriarchally constructed femininity. However, Marian's consumption of a woman's body made from cake is also explicitly Eucharistic in its symbolism. Marian is absorbing the power of woman and her body that, up until now, she has ignored. Atwood is urging women to assert their right to eat and re-inhabit their own bodies.

Conclusion

In the closing passages of *Lady Oracle*, Joan defines *herself* as 'an artist, an escape artist' (334). Her artistry derives from her ability to evade singular embodiment. She is not one woman, but many, and her multiplicity cannot be resolved unambiguously into uniformity. As such the female body, and ultimately female identity, cannot be neatly packaged within 'femininity'. In *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman*, Atwood disassembles the patriarchal concept of femininity and offers a new account of the female body. By re-appropriating the body, Atwood is able to articulate women's anxieties over her oppressive cultural experiences as well as confront that oppression. Her fiction exposes the falsities of mind/body dualisms that alienate woman from her body, and drive her from her somatic self. In so doing, Atwood proposes a transcendence of those falsities and the restricting boundaries they promote. For Atwood, the body is a means by which woman can assert *her* existence, and not a manipulated existence defined for her. In her fiction, Atwood employs a corporeal language of resistance. The female body manifests female powerlessness while simultaneously protesting against it, adapting the eating disorder to this purpose. Atwood's consideration of the female body as a site of power and resistance is one of the most crucial and profound statements of her work. As she states herself via Joan's narration: 'Words [are] not the prelude to war but the war itself' (57). Atwood's fiction urges women to empower themselves through positive re-embodiment; women need to re-embodiment culture by first re-embodimenting themselves.

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