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Between Reality and Fantasy: Different Means of Escape in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the relationship between the individual and the society by focusing on the main heroine of the novel, Joan Foster, and her problems of female identity and multiple selfhood. Joan, who defines herself as an escape artist, develops different means of escaping the entrapment of the male-dominated cultural myths imposed on her by her mother and the society she lives in, by changing her selves. Since she is a novelist, she struggles to escape the confines of her plots as well as her self by moving between the self and the Other, without being able to define either. In fact she is unable to achieve a liberating escape from either society or her own narratives, and only exchanges one kind of confinement for another. The whole narrative of Lady Oracle, which deals with one of the most spectacular escapes of the main heroine, her own death, blurs boundaries between reality and fantasy, the self and the Other, and appears to be an escape from the constraints of the Gothic conventions that are, as many critics have noted, present in the novel.

Résumé

Le présent ouvrage traite des relations entre l'individu et la société mettant au premier plan l'héroïne principale du roman, Joan Foster, et les problèmes multiples de son identité féminine. En se définissant comme artiste évadé, elle recourt aux différents moyens d'évasion des pièges tendus par les mythes masculins dominants. Ceux-ci lui sont imposés par sa propre mère et par la société. Elle s'en échappe en changeant elle-même. Ecrivain, elle essaie de s'évader des limites des intrigues de ses propres romans, errant tout le temps entre le Moi et l'Autre, ne réussissant pas à définir ni Moi ni Autre. Elle n'arrive pas à se délivrer ni de la société ni de ses propres histoires et elle ne fait que remplacer une sorte de restriction par une autre. Le roman entier, décrivant une des plus frappantes évasions de l'héroïne principale, sa mort, rend floues les limites entre la réalité et la fantaisie, le Moi et l'Autre et devient l'évasion des restrictions des conventions gothiques présentes, selon les opinions de nombreux critiques, dans le roman.

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* explores the relationship between self and society by seeing society and the immediate surroundings as the Other. The main heroine in the novel, Joan Foster, by trying to define herself against the dominant male cultural myths, against the rigid rules of her mother, follows a path of multiple selfhood by changing her self. She thus blurs the distinction between the self and the Other, and by dissolving boundaries she is always between mobility and fixity (Tucker, *passim*). Moreover, in trying to solve her problems of female identity and multiple selfhood, Joan moves between reality and fantasy. The character we agree to call Joan is also Lady Oracle and Louisa K. Delacourt and, practising different means of escape in the novel, to a certain extent Margaret Atwood herself.

Like Atwood's previous heroines, Joan is the confused product of her own fictions, but unlike the other characters she is intensely conscious of her ambivalent nature. She has been schooled in the Shakespearean notion that life is like a play and all the people in it actors constantly changing roles. Joan defines herself in the novel as "an escape artist" (LO, 335). She is a writer who writes Gothic romances, commercial novels. Her fiction is a way to escape reality, which confines her, and to live in fantasy, where her many selves can be sustained. Her need to escape reality suggests the importance of fluidity and mobility for her, especially where the myths of male dominance and her own plots are concerned. In reality, however, Joan is fixed either by her lover or by the plot of her novel. She tries to find a new self, a new identity, by clinging to a new lover or trying out a new writing technique. But in fact she only seems to exchange one confinement for another. Thus she stages a highly spectacular escape – her own death – and leaves Toronto for the small Italian town of Terremoto; it is this series of events that forms the narrative of *Lady Oracle*, which is also permeated by many flashbacks to her previous life in Toronto, her feeling of entrapment by her mother, her leaving her parents' house, her living abroad and her coming back to Toronto, where she becomes a famous writer thanks to exercising a new technique – that of writing from the Other side. Actually, the narrative of *Lady Oracle*, as well as the narratives of the costume Gothic novels *Escape from Love*, *Love My Ransom* and *Stalked by Love*, excerpts from which permeate and form part of the meaning of *Lady Oracle*, are characterized by different forms of escape: escape from the self, from society, from other people, one's parents and lovers, from the plots of the narratives. Joan escapes and hides herself within her own narrative in fantasy. The main heroine of *Stalked by Love*, Felicia, also tries to escape. Escape seems to be the human condition where there is a lack of courage to face reality. Joan understands that human need well and helps her readers escape into fantasy by writing costume Gothics. As she says:

Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers. (LO, 31)

Reality and fantasy are the main binary opposites around which the narration of the novel is structured, fantasy being a means to escape reality. In other words, escape is the basic way in which the main heroine deals with reality; this includes the textual escapades of Margaret Atwood's own narrative as well as of the plots of the main heroine's Gothic romances. As a number of critics argue,¹ *Lady Oracle* is a fiction about fiction – a metafiction – with an abundance of Gothic elements. Joan has written many Gothic narratives, but the central one that parallels the narrative of the novel is *Stalked by Love*, which has been her project since her staged death and her life on the Other side, that is in Italy. Another artistic form within the novel that is important for understanding another pattern of Joan's way of escape is the collection of poems entitled *Lady Oracle*, which are written from the Other Side, when Joan immerses herself in the mirror, and which bring into focus Joan's need to question the female identity within the male-inscribed world.

Writing from the Other Side is another way to escape the classical way of writing, a technique that Joan learns after visiting a few spiritualists' sessions with her Aunt Lou and her Aunt Lou's friend Robert. Actually, it is Leda Sprott, the leader of the sessions, who suggests that she should try automatic writing. After a few attempts at resisting this kind of writing, Joan writes her first set of verses by using a candle and a mirror,

crossing the boundary between the outer side and the inner side of the mirror at the moment of crisis when writing her Gothic novel *Love My Ransom*, not knowing how to go on with the plot of her novel. The automatic writing is based on free associations that arise when Joan crosses another boundary between her conscious and subconscious self, plunging into the world of her subconscious self, trying to find there her real self and instead finding the words that will make up the poems of *Lady Oracle* and make her a celebrity. However, another important boundary that she crosses is between the inside and outside, and she becomes totally immersed in the world inside, remaining apart from outer relations with other people and being completely involved in the creative process.

Crossing the boundary and going to the Other Side is a way to face truth and self. Being completely alone, she sees the self that is hers and all the double and multiple selves that she has created in her fantasy disappear.

I would find the thing, the truth or person that was mine, that was waiting for me. Only one thing changed: the feeling that someone was standing behind me was not repeated. (*LO*, 223)

Looking into the mirror and stepping over into the Other Side, the boundary between reality and fantasy blurs. Joan is not sure whether her self is real. The only reality is the words that come out and that make up her poetry.

I had actually written a word, without being conscious of doing it. Not only that, I'd seen someone in the mirror, or rather in the room, standing behind me. I was not sure of it. Everything Leda Sprott had told me came back to me; it was real, I was convinced it was real and someone had a message for me. (*LO*, 222)

The problem that arises during the automatic writing experiments and that is turned into verse is the problem of female identity. The words centred around the female figure, "enormously powerful, almost like a goddess" (*LO*, 224), have been suppressed and hidden deeply inside. The woman, the lady, feels threatened by the masculine world. Thinking about love and commitment, she feels entrapped as though being "between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again" (*LO*, 335). She tries to escape entrapment by changing her lovers, but they are not liberating enough. She ends her love relationships, which have been only a sort of fantasy to liberate her self, by asking herself "Why did every one of my fantasies turn into a trap?" (*LO*, 335). Relationships with other people, especially with men, seem to be a confinement and a trap for her – her past and her commitment to other people seem to suffocate her. While in Italy, her personal integrity is threatened once again by the presence of another man who, so she is informed by Mr. Vitroni, the owner of the apartment she has rented, is following her. She immediately thinks of another way to escape:

This time I really would disappear, without a trace. No one at all would know where I was, not even Sam, not even Arthur. This time I would be free completely, no shreds of the past would cling to me, no clutching fingers. (*LO*, 34)

Her problems arise from the fact that she cannot relate to her self appropriately – her many selves as she says – and is always trying to match other people's expectations.

Toward the end of the book, she comes to a conclusion: "From now on, I thought, I would dance for no one but myself. May I have this waltz? I whispered" (LO, 335). Her female identity/ integrity is torn apart between faithfulness to her self and to other people. Joan realizes that she is left with a choice:

You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you have this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your feet off so you wouldn't be able to dance. Finally you overcame your fear and danced, and they cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you wanted to dance. (LO, 336)

But this is not a choice at all. Even when she overcomes the fear of total commitment to herself, she can lose her lover, which also leaves her incomplete. She asks herself: "How could I escape now, on my cut feet?" (LO, 336). No matter what kind of choice she makes, she ends up with an entrapment from which she again seeks escape. Her escapes serve the purpose of avoiding the impositions of men and of moving between boundaries.

Her problematic love affairs are due to the fact that she cannot distinguish between men who are rescuers and those who are villains. Like everywhere else in the novel, this distinction is blurred in the consciousness of the main protagonist as well. Relationships are rendered problematic by words that set such boundaries. Warned about avoiding bad men by her mother, Joan understands the warning abstractly and often finds out in practice that she cannot rely on her mother's conclusions. When she finds herself crossing a dangerous ravine where "bad men" are supposed to lurk, Joan encounters "bad girls", her Brownie friends, who tie her to a tree and abandon her there. When a man rescues her, she cannot be sure whether he is bad or good. Joan accepts the man's help although he exposes himself as a flasher. Her attitudes towards the man, whether he is a rescuer or a villain, are completely blended in her mind so that she muses:

I still wasn't sure though ... was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once? (LO, 61)

Her three major relationships with men become projections of the early confusion over men as rescuers or villains. Her first lover, Paul, rescues her from falling off a bus near Trafalgar Square in London. Paul is a Polish aristocrat, an exile, who writes nurse novels replete with pursuing men and pursued women that reinforce Joan's assumptions about male behavior. Although acting like a romantic rescuer for Joan, giving her shelter, he also appears to be a villainous jailer. He forces Joan to live according to his rigid sex stereotyping, which includes jealous possession of Joan. He accuses her of infidelity to such an extent that Joan, finding herself oppressed, acquires a lover and tries to escape. Arthur is her next rescuer and lover; for Joan he becomes "a melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron whose biography I had just been skimming" (LO, 165). Arthur, as his name suggests, is a crusader, but he undergoes some transformation with his marriage to Joan. Joan finds herself trapped in another's patriarchal plot and immobilized even more than she was with Paul. Her role as wife is very oppressive, for she realizes that "for years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be" (LO, 212). Her life with Arthur turns out to consist of many attempts to conform to the patterns he constructs for her, making her unshaped, "a kind of nourishing blob"

(LO, 213). Joan has no sense of herself, because she is not allowed to live her actual self. The only outlet she finds from the suffocating and immobilizing marriage is her Gothic novels. Her friends and other women have similar problems and expectations.

The other wives, too, wanted their husbands to live up to their own fantasy lives, which except for the costumes weren't that different from my own. They didn't put it in quite these terms, but I could tell from their expectations. (LO, 217)

And when it comes to fantasy lives, Joan is a professional, as she confesses. In real life, she has two identities – those of Joan Foster and Louisa K. Delacourt – and she is a master of creating life patterns for the characters of her novels. But the problem is that she, like other women, cannot turn these fantasies into reality, which makes her lifeless and inert.

It was like I had two lives, but on off days I felt that house, I wasn't really working at it. And my Costume Gothics were only paper; paper castles, paper costumes, paper dolls, as inert as lifeless finally as those unsatisfactory blank-eyed dolls I'd dressed and undressed in my mother's house. (LO, 218)

The need to escape Arthur and lifelessness becomes obvious to her during a trip to Italy when she encounters, in a garden at Tivoli, the statue of Diana of Ephesus, which she comprehends as being an image of stasis and passivity.

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. (LO, 255)

Joan recognizes herself in the goddess in terms of body shape, for she has never escaped the image of the fat Joan from her childhood, and also as nurturer. But she realizes that she cannot be a nurturer any more: "My ability to give was limited, I was not inexhaustible" (LO, 255). In other words, Joan decides not to be a frozen reflection of the male need. She decides to desire things for herself from now on.

She turns to Royal Porcupine, her next lover, who seems to be more liberating, but she ends up entrapped and immobilized. Joan is attracted to Royal Porcupine at first owing to his rejection of language and his attitude to art. He advocates "the poetry of things", "concrete poetry, I'm the man who put the creativity back in concrete" (LO, 243), expressing thus his tendency toward fixity, turning Joan herself into concrete, a thing, an object of art. He, for his part, is attracted to Joan and her image of culture heroine, which she becomes after publishing her book of verse *Lady Oracle*. What he wants is Joan as a cult figure, making her into an art object and a past event. Joan observes that "he started seeing the present as though it was already the past, bandaged in gauzy nostalgia" (LO, 269), fixing and immobilizing Joan so that she feels as though "each of my gestures was petrified as I performed it, each kiss embalmed, as if he was saving things up. I felt like a collectable" (LO, 269). Royal Porcupine's name and the image that he cultivates fit into Joan's vision of Gothic novels. He is fond of old and unusual things and of wearing odd costumes and clothes; he makes his real life a fantasy. Royal Porcupine himself has successfully escaped his own name and vocation and entered into an earlier time period by having the proper costumes – a cloak, spats, a gold-

headed cane, white gloves and a top hat. He is also red haired and has an elegant mustache and beard, embroidered with porcupine quills.

As Joan observes, “for him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality” (*LO*, 272). For Joan, the distinction between reality and fantasy is blurred; for Royal Porcupine reality and fantasy are completely identified. Since, in the process of identification, there is nothing that Joan can escape to, it is necessary for her to maintain the easy dichotomy between reality and fantasy. Royal Porcupine’s way of life and his preoccupation with fantasy are not acceptable because “for me it would mean there is no fantasy, and therefore no escape” (*LO*, 272). In this connection, Lindsey Tucker makes a shrewd point.

Joan’s problems with boundary dissolution are not made to reflect her preoccupation with fantasy as much as they are to represent her awareness – albeit not always conceptualized – of the gap between what is “real” and what is perceived to be real. (Tucker, 43)

Joan Foster models her life on the concept of romance: “‘All my life,’ she says, ‘I’d been hooked on plots’” (*LO*, 312). She conceives of even her adult life as a series of recognizable patterns. Quite early in the novel, she adopts the role of Snow White, the image of virtue and victimization who is the object of the wrath and envy of the evil stepmother. Joan’s actual mother, whom Joan often imagines to be her stepmother, is preoccupied with beauty. Like the evil queen, she sits before her magic mirror in Joan’s childhood memory, and in a recurring dream Joan watches her mother applying her make-up and using lipstick to make a “double mouth”, “the real one showing through the false one like a shadow” (*LO*, 65). Joan’s mother does indeed have a “double mouth”, which says one thing and means another. Her temper is violent and, in fact, she precipitates Joan’s flight from home by actually stabbing her daughter with a kitchen knife. By watching her before a triple mirror, Joan projects upon her her own vision of her mother as a monster with three heads and three necks.

Joan sees her mother as a single entity, a monster, but the mirror, as is usually the case in Atwood’s fiction and poetry, reflects the true and multiple image. Joan is our only narrator and she is unreliable. By her own admission, she is “a compulsive and romantic liar” (*LO*, 30). She is telling the story, which is this novel, to a reporter, a man in whom she is interested and to whom she “didn’t tell any lies” (*LO*, 344). Along with all her other fabrications, Joan perhaps creates this image of her mother as the evil queen in order to preserve the corresponding image of herself as Snow White. The myth is necessary to her and she cannot part with her fantasy mother. Another confinement or entrapment that Joan tries to escape throughout the novel, which some critics² describe as the key to the understanding of Joan’s character, is her relationship with her mother. As one of the critics notes, Joan “moves through mirrors and through her own self-deluding fictions into a realm of fairy tales and myth where, instead of escaping, she becomes trapped in the very surfaces she strives to create” (Rigney, 62).

Another of Joan’s mythologically-inspired identities, like the Snow White persona, is the fat lady image, closely connected with a childhood experience in which her mother and her dancing teacher in collusion decide that Joan is too plump to make a convincing butterfly in the ballet recital. She is therefore robbed of her wings and reduced to the role of mothball. Even years later when Joan sheds her pounds of fat, emerging finally into the role of butterfly, she is haunted by the ghost of her fat self, “my dark twin. ... She wanted to kill me and take my place” (*LO*, 279).

In the first page of the novel, she invokes the dual images of the Fat lady and the Lady of Shalott as metaphors for her own life, which, she says, “had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror” (LO, 3). Isolated in a metaphoric tower which, she only partly realizes, is of her own creation, Joan plays her part as the artist, writing her Gothic novels and gazing in a mirror at her concept of reality. The “knight” she invents for her medieval lady self is her husband, appropriately named Arthur. Finally, Joan choreographs her own death to correspond to Tennyson’s poem. Like Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott, “the lady in the tower, who couldn’t stand the view of her own life” (LO, 363), Joan too cannot stand the view of her own life and, attempting to untangle herself from her ornate tapestry of lies, she imitates her own suicide, pretending to have drowned but actually floating to the illusion of freedom in a death barge. Unlike the “drownings” in Atwood’s poems and in *Surfacing*, the journey underwater is not revelatory, but rather part of the game which is Joan’s life. She holds on to her fictions: “You could stay in the tower of years,” she says, “weaving away, looking in the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The curse, the doom” (LO, 316).

Joan tries to escape from reality through her fiction, but once she is in the fiction she discovers that the problems which she has faced in the so-called real world are still present, albeit much more forcefully because they have been fictionally distilled. When she writes, Joan becomes the heroines of her novels. It is not unusual for writers to experience this kind of intense identification with their imaginary characters during the course of writing. But unlike most writers, Joan gets trapped in her novels. And the more she writes, the more she becomes immersed in her plots. At first Joan seems to be able to separate herself from the situations in her fiction and to distinguish between reality and art, although she often finds it necessary physically to rehearse the scenes she is describing and sometimes becomes so involved in her rehearsals that they seem to have become her reality. In *Love My Ransom*, due to the identification between Joan and Penelope, the Gothic heroine, Penelope begins to experience the same problems with mirrors that Joan has started to encounter.

[Penelope’s] own reflection disappeared ... 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. (LO, 220)

Penelope’s fate obviously echoes Joan’s voyage into the mirror where the self is unknown. By the end of the novel, the identification between Joan and her visions is so complete that she stands in for Felicia in *Stalked by Love*. As Joan opens the door to the reporter she simultaneously opens it to Redmond as Arthur, and the synthesis of the teller and tale is made complete. In *Stalked by Love*, Felicia arrives at the central plot (and by implication at the central truth) of the maze in which she has become lost. Joan is drawn down into a maze from which there is no way out. Joan does not find the role that will release her from her fiction. Robert Lecker suggests in his essay “Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood’s First Three Novels” that

structurally the novel is a failed romance in which the heroine goes through all the motions that should lead to her inevitable release, only to discover that the romance’s promised return from the dream world never occurs. ... The disruption of traditional romance structures provides an implicit comment on the contemporary impossibility of ever finding the final sense of identity and completion or the ultimate vision of happiness

which, as Joan well realizes, is usually offered by romance. (Lecker, 201)

Lecker argues that the problem of interpreting Atwood's novels stems from the frequently made assumption that Atwood has taken theoretical perspectives and converted them into fictional terms. Thus it is said that *Lady Oracle* might be read as creative metacriticism that takes Frye's *The Secular Scripture* as its base. Lecker suggests that, when Atwood uses theoretical patterns, she wants to suggest that the assumptions are false. To simplify Frye's ideas greatly, in *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Secular Scripture* he argues that the structure of romance corresponds to the movement of the hero, who inevitably becomes involved in a search for identity, which leads him away from a childlike, unaware existence into an archetypal underworld realm of dream, darkness and loneliness. The descent comprises the hero's initiation into experience; only after the downward movement has been completed can the hero rise again, returning to life, safety, community and, most of all, self-identity. Similarly, the lower world becomes a metaphor for the unconscious, for the demonic and for all the qualities associated with darkness and divorce. Moreover, the romance cycle as Frye describes it is the product of an involved interplay between the themes of death and rebirth, exile and return. For Frye, the return is essential.

Ironically enough, there is no return in *Lady Oracle*. The emphasis placed on themes of descent and escape in *Lady Oracle* far outweighs that placed on the themes of ascent. Joan spends most of her narrative telling us about the labyrinths she is caught in, how she escaped, how she drowned and about the ways she tried to hide her identity. She does not complete the return to the upper world as demanded by Frye's model. The end of the book pulls her back to the story of her death by drowning. The reintegration with society has not been materialized at the end of the novel and Joan's life and fictions appear to be a modern fall from any meaningful sense of self or community.

Endnotes

1. For example Sherill Grace and Ann McMillan.
2. This primarily refers to psychological readings of the novel and critics such as Roberta Rubenstein, Gayle Green, Molly Hite and others.

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