

SEDUCTION AND SERVITUDE: THE EROTICS OF WOMEN'S CAPTIVITY  
NARRATIVES

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SEDUCTION AND SERVITUDE: THE EROTICS OF WOMEN'S CAPTIVITY  
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My dissertation considers narratives of Indian captivity and antebellum slavery in relation to erotic novels that depict fantasies of willing enslavement. While carefully evaluating the historical context of each narrative, I focus on the psychic dimensions of domination and submission in order to identify desire and agency and then to question when and if desire determines agency. The psychoanalytic model of the seduction fantasy proposes that the eroticization of and the desire for submission may be linked to a structural foundation of human subjectivity. By acknowledging the possibility of a subject's masochistic relationship to the Other, I interrogate the psychic foundation of the desire for submission; such a desire raises an uncomfortable but necessary questioning of both the extent to which and the ways in which a captive is complicit in her servitude. I offer an innovative approach to captivity literature through the development of a transhistorical account of the psychological conditions of servitude by showing that the captive's ability to act as an agent of her own will is subject to both external and internal constraints: the orders of her captors, various historical and material conditions, and her unconscious fantasies, especially her relationship to the psychical Other.

My first two chapters examine Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* and Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, respectively. I argue that the captives' expressions of masochistic desire are linked to colonial political agendas concerning racial hierarchies and territorial expansion. Next I turn to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in which Jacobs endures masochistic suffering to

move toward a political goal of freedom. Chapter four focuses on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; like Jacobs, Atwood demonstrates the perils of being objectified in servitude. Atwood also explores the constraints of a social and symbolic order that tends to limit expressions of a woman's desire to fantasies envisioned by the male subject. The final chapter considers Pauline Réage's *Story of O*; it presents the most dramatic and definite example of a consenting captive, allowing me to untangle the complicated relationship between femininity and masochism in psychoanalytic theory.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Susan Hall was born and raised in Pennsylvania. She graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in English from Washington and Lee University in 1997, where she wrote an honors thesis on the works of Edith Wharton. She then traveled to New Zealand on a Fulbright scholarship, and she earned a M.A. in English with first class honours from the University of Auckland, where she completed a thesis on the works of Willa Cather and Katherine Mansfield. At Cornell University, she earned a M.A. in English in 2005 and a Ph.D. in English in January 2008. She currently lives in Lexington, VA, where she is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Washington and Lee University.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for all of the love and support that they have given me over the years.

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## INTRODUCTION

Seduction and servitude, two main topics of women's captivity literature, highlight the entanglement of desire and agency that play out in the female captive's account of her captivity experience. Contemporary captivity literature, like the autobiographical accounts from earlier centuries, reveals that power relations between master and slave, captor and captive, are unstable and subject to contestation through inversions of authority and through the psychic relations between the two parties. In my study of captivity literature, I examine a wide range of captivity narratives in order to study seduction as a mode of amorous discourse, a strategy of subversion, and an unconscious fantasy. I consider autobiographical narratives that describe being held hostage in a foreign culture in relation to erotic novels that depict fantasies of willing enslavement.

From a historical and generic standpoint, Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* is the foundational narrative of women's captivity literature; it introduces the dynamic of domination and submission that recurs in later captivity texts by Catharine Sedgwick, Harriet Jacobs, Pauline Réage, and Margaret Atwood. Various theories of seduction stress the uncertain distribution of power between seducer and seduced, and the following terms associated with seduction demonstrate the ambiguity but also the richness of the concept: fantasy and reality, consent and coercion, and lastly, allurements and rape. The terms fluctuate between seemingly contradictory poles, but it is in the very oscillation between these poles that an opportunity arises to locate both the female captive's exercise of agency and the expression of her desire.

Through the use of seductive ploys, I show how captive female figures challenge patriarchal familial arrangements and racist social structures as they trouble,

or possibly even overturn, these oppressive systems. Thus, seduction presents itself as a possible mode of resistance for those who are slaves and captives. Contemporary captivity literature by writers like Pauline Réage and Margaret Atwood engages in a critique of the symbolic order understood as language and as the social rules governing co-existence. Through hyper-attention to linguistics and to destabilizing narrative strategies, Réage and Atwood self-consciously explore and test the boundaries of the representational ability of language, and they both suggest that the protagonists in each of their texts are captives of language as much as they are of various other social structures. The psychoanalytic model of seduction, which posits the positions of object and Other, links transhistorical captivity narratives by stressing the psychic dimension of subjectivity that transcends any particular historical period. The focus on a Lacanian model of feminine subjectivity raises questions about the potential of the feminine subject to expose the inadequacy of the symbolic order, and it leads to an exploration of other possibilities of signification outside of the present symbolic order. My comparatist approach highlights issues concerning feminine agency and desire, which are often obscured in historical and cultural studies of captivity literature.

As far as the captive's desire is concerned, she is often required to subordinate her desire to the desire of a male authority figure; on the official level, her expressed desire is meant to coincide with male desire. However, a subversive model of feminine desire manifests itself in many of the narratives because the female captives often act or speak against various father figures. Sometimes inadvertently and sometimes purposefully, female captives assert their agency in ways that contradict patriarchal ideology, including domestic, political, and religious ideologies, and this often occurs in the form of daughters or wives confronting and challenging the authority of various father figures. In many cases, the agency of the female captive

has the potential to be a subversive force in society, one that reshapes the social sphere in ways that are more progressive in regard to the rights of women and people of color. Many of the captivity narratives that I consider feature imperiled heroines who struggle to maintain their very lives, frequently in times of colonial or national crisis, and who challenge the norms of patriarchal society. The captivity genre paradoxically stages the possibilities and limitations of women's agency because the extremity and urgency of the situation suspends the necessity of conforming to conventional gender roles, even though the captive female figure is clearly enduring restrictions on her autonomy.

Psychoanalytic theory proposes a crucial model of desire for both masculine and feminine subjects in which the subject responds to the desire of the Other; that is, a subject forms his or her ego as an object of desire for the Other, as in the account offered by Lacan's mirror stage. The psychoanalytic model of the seduction fantasy proposes that the eroticization of and the desire for submission may be linked to a structural foundation of human subjectivity; this model is formulated in Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," an essay in which literature, history, and psychoanalysis converge. Many of the normal or typical children whom Freud analyzed reported that their masturbatory fantasies derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although by no means eliding the violent and degrading objectification suffered by victims of the historical institution of slavery, the children's fixation on the exploitation and humiliation described in Stowe's text highlights the possibility of a fundamental erotic fantasy in which the subject is in an unconscious position of masochism.

The children's beating fantasies also suggest that historical and literary accounts of servitude shape how people imagine and experience sexuality. Moreover,

the beating fantasies reveal that involuntary servitude is not only a harsh historical reality suffered by unwilling, objectified victims but also a prevalent and fundamental erotic fantasy staging the subject's relation to a psychical Other. The convergence of eroticism and violence is exemplified in the fantasy's fundamental wish: "I am being beaten by my father"; this wish indicates a primordial masochism at the root of the subject's psychic position. In light of this discovery, Freud theorizes the seduction fantasy, proposing that the subject's ego is formed as an object of love or hate for the Other. Lacan develops this theory in his account of the mirror stage in which the child constructs his or her ego as an object of the Other's desire in order to repress the fragmented body of the drives, the site of primary masochism. Thus, an eroticized desire for submission is an expression of the unconscious seduction fantasy, which suggests that even unwilling captives may find an element of satisfaction in the experience of servitude. The captive's complicity—at least in certain aspects of her captivity—raises complex questions about the psychic and political significance of masochistic desire, the instability of cultural boundaries, and the emergence of a feminine subject of desire.

While my own study of captivity literature is not tied to a historical period or a historical model of investigation, historical studies of captivity literature are nevertheless important foundations for my analysis of captivity literature. In her work on women's experiences in frontier settings, Annette Kolodny argues that captivity narratives have the distinction of being "the single narrative form indigenous to the New World [which] is the victim's recounting of unwilling captivity and that, in English, the history of this genre begins with a Puritan woman" (6). Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse go one step further than Kolodny by arguing that "[o]ne has to go to America, in other words, to understand where English novels come from" (388). Armstrong and Tennenhouse compare the plight of Mary Rowlandson among

her Indian captors to that of Pamela in the aristocratic house of the libertine Mr.B. Their comparison aims to show that an audience for novels depicting a non-aristocratic woman striving to preserve her virtue and her ties to her home, whether of a larger community or of an individual family, originates with the tremendously popular narrative of Indian captivity written by Mary Rowlandson (391).

As Armstrong and Tennenhouse point out, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, which appeared in 1740, is "generally considered the first domestic novel" (388). Along with Kolodny, Armstrong and Tennenhouse raise key questions about historical events and developments in literary genre, and Elizabeth Barnes's *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* similarly participates in this line of inquiry by showing how much of post-revolutionary American fiction "stage[s] political issues as personal dramas" (16). Although Barnes does not discuss captivity literature in her study, I use her insights about the political workings of seduction novels to discuss Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, a historical romance novel that abounds in multiple captivity scenarios. Armstrong and Tennenhouse's argument about the origins of the English novel identifies the centrality of the threat, or conversely of the welcome possibility, of seduction—whether sexual in the case of Pamela or cultural in the case of Rowlandson—as the main drama accompanying the woman's captivity experience. In one of the most recent studies of captivity literature to appear, Teresa Toulouse focuses on "the literal and metaphorical meanings of the possible seduction of the captive woman" in her work (18), *The Captive's Position: Female Narrative, Male Identity, and Royal Authority in Colonial New England*, published in 2007. Christopher Castiglia considers the "the captives' cultural crossings" in relation to ideologies about essential versus constructed identities (4), and Rebecca Faery analyzes the politics of cultural crossing in relation to the nationalist agenda of expansion. Like Castiglia and Faery, Toulouse considers the implications of cultural

crossing in captivity narratives, but she frames the cultural border crossing in terms of seduction, as it was understood by the Puritans (161). Across historical periods and across genres, seduction is a constant preoccupation of captivity literature, and as various critics suggest, seduction brings to the fore issues concerning sexuality and politics.

Commenting on the blurred lines between fathers and lovers in seduction fiction, Barnes offers perceptive claims about the performative function of this literature in relation to its content: “Seduction thus denotes not only what the story is about but also what it does: it breaks down distinctions between parent and lover, moral guide and criminal influence, and translates ‘female education’ into another form of seduction” (9).<sup>1</sup> Barnes also provides the etymology of the word seduction: “The root of both words is the Latin for ‘to lead’: *dūcere*. *Sedūcere* is ‘to lead aside, or mislead’; *ēdūcere* is ‘to lead in the way of life, or to rear (a child),” and she notes that “the linguistic root of the words suggests that the difference between to lead and to mislead is not definitive but relative” (51). Barnes cites the example of the Marquis de Sade’s *Crimes of Love* in relation to her discussion of seduction and education, and one might also consider Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, a classic libertine text that rather spectacularly brings the two terms together. There are two varying epigraphs to *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, one from the 1795 edition and the other from the 1805 edition: “Mothers will make this volume mandatory reading for their daughters” and “Mothers will forbid their daughters to read it” (179, 180). The two versions of the epigraph may result from a typographical error that substitutes “*préscrira*” (179) and “*proscrira*” (180), but either version is intriguing and provocative. The first epigraph alludes to the instructive goal of the text, and the second version evokes the temptation associated with forbidden knowledge. Eugénie de Mistival is a captive of sorts in the

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<sup>1</sup> See also p. 3 of Barnes’s work for a discussion of this topic.

home of Madame de Saint-Ange, a great devotee of libertinage, and she eagerly plunges into the lewd education that she receives from Madame. In particular, Réage's *Story of O* refers to the libertine world of sexual excess and indulgence envisioned by Sade, but all of the texts examined here likewise depict seduction, in terms of exposure to erotic temptation or to sexual abuse, as an integral element of the captivity experience.

Sigmund Freud's case histories and his other writings on hysteria, neuroses, and the drives lay the groundwork for psychoanalytic accounts of seduction and provide a key theoretical framework for my study of the importance of seduction and servitude in captivity literature. Freud's thinking on seduction goes through a number of complicated stages, but one of the important points lies in the oscillation between the positions of victim and agent in the seduction scenarios, that is one is either seduced or one attempts to seduce. "Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence" (1896), one of Freud's early essays on seduction, stresses that seduction is an actual event in a person's early childhood, which usually involves sexual contact between an adult and a child. In the same essay, Freud proposes that hysteria arises from "*sexual passivity during the pre-sexual period*" (163); in contrast, obsessional neurosis arises from "acts of aggression carried out with pleasure and of pleasurable participation in sexual acts—that is to say, of sexual activity" (168). Freud, however, is quick to point out "that precocious sexual activity always implies a previous experience of being seduced" (169), citing the example of a sister seduced by a brother who was in turn seduced by an older cousin—the cycle originating with a governess who had seduced the cousin (165).

Freud's investigation of the origin of neuroses in "The Aetiology of Hysteria" (1896) leads to further elaboration of the nature of seduction and of hysterical symptoms; he argues for the necessary foundation of a real experience of sexual



trauma, as well as the significance of the memory of the trauma. In “Further Remarks” and in “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” Freud uses the term seduction to cover a range of sexual encounters, from “attempted rape” to a young man’s act of touching the hand of a young woman (“Aetiology” 200). In the early stages of his work on seduction, Freud’s use of the word “seduction” generally refers to an incident that would be called sexual molestation or abuse in today’s terms. Freud is direct in his condemnation of those who seduce young children:

The childhood traumas which analysis uncovered in these severe cases had all to be classed as grave sexual injuries; some of them were positively revolting. Foremost among those guilty of abuses like these, with their momentous consequences, are nursemaids, governesses and domestic servants, to whose care children are only too thoughtlessly entrusted; teachers, moreover, figure with regrettable frequency.

(“Further” 164)

The frequently cited 21 September 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, friend and colleague, specifically mentions fathers as seducers, and this is the letter in which Freud declares “I no longer believe in my *neurotica* [theory of the neuroses]” (264). Freud cites his failure to successfully bring an analysis “to a real conclusion” and “the surprise that in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse” (264). Freud’s reluctance to name the father as seducer has generated a storm of controversy,<sup>2</sup> and it certainly suggests a problematic desire to protect the father from the same criticism leveled at the caretakers named above. However, it is important to

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<sup>2</sup> Various critics have rebuked Freud for his so-called abandonment of the seduction theory; Masson’s *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* is one of the most sensational examples of this. See also Evans’s “Hysteria and the Seduction of Theory” for a discussion of Freud’s seduction theory in relation to his clinical practice. See Cummings for a balanced treatment of the controversy over Freud’s seduction theory and for a development of his theory, especially the introduction and chapter one.

note that Freud never denied that sexual abuse of children by adults, including fathers, occurred; even after his theory on seduction undergoes substantial revision, Freud still considers seduction, understood as a traumatic sexual encounter in childhood, as one of the precipitating causes of psychological disturbances in adults.<sup>3</sup>

The abandonment of the “*neurotica*” leads Freud to the next stage of his theory of seduction (Fliess letter 264); in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he argues for the existence of infantile sexuality, which leads him to underscore the pivotal role of fantasy in sexuality, especially through the myth of the Oedipus complex. Freud downplays the role of seduction as an actual sexual event; instead, he focuses on “the factors of sexual constitution and development” (56).<sup>4</sup> Yet, the interplay of reality and fantasy remains a vital concern in Freud’s work, and in *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, he remarks “upon unconscious love relations” between parents and children, insisting that desire is operative in both parties: “at ... an early age sexual attraction makes itself felt between parents and children, and I have explained that the myth of Oedipus is probably to be regarded as a poetical rendering of what is typical in these relations” (49). Seduction is no longer exclusively theorized as an actual physical act involving genital contact between two parties; rather, it is a phenomenon involving the psyche. Yet, the actual fact of a sexual trauma and the importance of fantasy in the unconscious is an irresolvable debate in Freud’s seduction theory. Later essays by Freud such as, “Female Sexuality” (1931) and “Femininity” (1933), again stress the material reality of the body, claiming that the mother’s hygienic care for the child awakens the child’s

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<sup>3</sup> See Freud’s note added in 1924 to his essay on “Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence,” p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Freud’s essay on “Female Sexuality” also discusses the girl’s fantasy of seduction by the father as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex, see pp 191, 197; his essay on “Femininity” offers a similar theorization, see pp. 149-150.

sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Positing the mother as the original seducer of the child, Freud discloses the uncertainties in his own theory of seduction, as well as the uncertain lines dividing fantasy from reality and seducer from seduced. The roles of seducer and seduced are shifting and unstable throughout his theorizations of seduction, but the ambiguous nature of the event and Freud's revisions to and developments of his theory suggest the complexity of agency and desire at play in the encounter of seduction.

Analysis of the beating fantasies in young children leads Freud to further discoveries about the force of unconscious desire and the phenomenon of seduction. Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" sets forth three stages of the beating fantasy that offer important theorizations about unconscious processes such as repression and that show different vicissitudes of the drive. Freud provides the following summary of the three phases of the beating fantasy in girls:

The little girl's beating-phantasy goes through three phases, of which the first and third are consciously remembered, the middle one remaining unconscious. The two conscious phases appear to be sadistic, whereas the middle and unconscious one is undoubtedly of a masochistic nature; its content consists in being beaten by the father, and it carries with it the libidinal cathexis and the sense of guilt. In the first and third phantasies the child who is being beaten is always someone else; in the middle phase it is only the child itself; in the third phase it is almost invariably only boys who are being beaten. The person beating is from the first the father, but is later on a substitute taken from the class of fathers. The unconscious phantasy of the middle phase had primarily a genital significance and developed by

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<sup>5</sup> See Freud's "Female Sexuality" pp. 192, 197, 201, and "Femininity" pp. 149-150.

means of repression and regression out of an incestuous wish to be loved by the father. (114)

Freud stresses that the second phase is the most important (113); the second phase testifies to the power of the child's love for the father to live on in the unconscious. If being beaten by the father is indeed a subterfuge for the wish to be loved by the father, then the beating fantasy can also be read as a seduction fantasy because its aim is to secure the father's love. While the beating fantasy does convey the child's desire to be the object of the father's love, the question of agency is fraught with complications because the fantasy is unconscious. The father's role, or the role of whoever may be filling in the function of disciplinarian and standing in the place of the Other, in all of these fantasies is also ambiguous because he or she may be provoking the fantasy; that is, the fantasy may be a response to a perceived desire emanating from the Other.<sup>6</sup>

Jacques Lacan's formulation of the mirror stage offers a theoretical model of seduction that moves beyond Freud's original emphasis on the actual fact of a sexual encounter between a child and an adult (or even between a child and another child), but it nonetheless maintains a point of reference with Freud's theory of seduction by emphasizing that the ego is formed as the object of the Other's desire, as Freud suggests that it is in his analysis of the beating fantasy.<sup>7</sup> As Tracy McNulty writes: "Lacan identifies the structural underpinnings of seduction in the mirror stage, where the ego comes into being as an object for the Other" (179). While seduction is a

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<sup>6</sup> See Laplanche's "Seduction, Persecution, Revelation" for a discussion of the transmission of a message as the heart of seduction. Laplanche argues that "the other scenarios [primal scene, castration] invoked as primal have seduction as their nucleus, to the extent that they too convey messages from the other, always at first in the direction from adult to child" (170). Laplanche's "Masochism and the General Theory of Seduction" offers an extended treatment of the connections between seduction and masochism; the gist of his argument is encapsulated in the following statement: "The theory of seduction affirms the priority of the other in the constitution of the human being and of its sexuality. Not the Lacanian Other, but the concrete other: the adult facing the child. A perverse adult? Yes, one must say; but intrinsically perverse because his messages are 'compromised' by his own unconscious" (212).

<sup>7</sup> See Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."

phenomenon that affects both male and female subjects, Willy Apollon suggests a way in which a further interrogation of the woman's complaint of seduction by her father may open up questions about the psychic structure of femininity. Apollon examines woman's relationship to the signifier; he writes that "the signifier determines the unconscious relation of the subject to enjoyment (*jouissance*)" (101). The signifier is a crucial key to the subject's unconscious and a unique way in which the subject seeks to identify himself or herself as a subject. In regard to the seduction fantasy, Apollon poses the following query in an attempt to account for Freud's problems in theorizing seduction:

Could all the little girls – the women in analysis – have been seduced by their father, or is it that the seduction fantasy is already formulated by what will become the phenomenology of the complaint or the memory of paternal love? In other terms, shouldn't we see, in the fantasy of the little girl's seduction by the father, the very structure of the search for the signifier as pure offering of love? (104)

Apollon identifies the feminine response to castration, understood as alienation or lack in language, as a contesting of the signifier, a distrust of the signifier (104). The girl seeks the father's word of love to provide her with a unique and unmediated identity (that is, one which is not established through a relation to the mother); the failure of the father's word of love to provide this unique signifier of love is related to the feminine subject's distrust of the signifier, especially in relation to its failure to circumscribe and provide a limit for the experience of the Other *jouissance*. The inadequacy of the signifier and of language is tied to seduction because the desire of the Other is a central concern in each of these concepts and phenomena, as Apollon explains, "The certainty required of the signifier in this questioning plays out the

fundamental inadequacy of language, the arbitrariness of the signifier, against the relation of the lover's discourse to the desire of the Other" (105).

The circumstances of captivity foreground many of the same issues that are highlighted in scenarios of seduction: coercion and consent, fantasy and reality, and temptation and violation. Using theories of seduction, I bring the psychoanalytic model of seduction into dialogue with the captivity literature that I consider to examine the significance of sexual, psychic, and political aspects of captivity literature. The captive female figure often uses strategies of seduction to contest discursive, gender, and political systems of power, and I engage with seduction as a strategy of resistance in which the female captive manages to loosen the bonds of her male captor. In addition, I examine seduction as an unconscious fantasy in which the subject's ego depends on the psychical Other to consider the stakes of the feminine subject's contesting of the signifier and of language itself. The ambivalent nature of seduction and the unstable relationship between victim and agent in the positions of seducer and seduced provide an opportunity to evaluate the convergence of sexuality and politics in captivity literature. The depiction of each captive's involuntary—or in some cases, voluntary—servitude also poses the following questions about desire: How do you know your own desire? Do you fulfill your own desire by submitting to someone else's desire; that is, is the fulfillment of the Other's desire an instrument through which you achieve your own desire? What happens to desire when the subject acknowledges the failure of the seduction fantasy?

"Seduction and Subversive Desire in Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*," the first chapter of my dissertation, analyzes the various modes of seduction raised in this early American captivity narrative. Rowlandson violates a number of bans on traditional conduct for Puritan women, not the least of which concerns the public circulation of her text. Before its contents are even considered,

the fact of the public dissemination of a woman's text constituted a scandal in and of itself for the Puritan community, initiating the pioneering and radical tradition of captivity literature. Rowlandson's text also portrays a core element of Indian captivity narratives, an encounter with difference across racial, sexual, and cultural boundaries. In Rowlandson's case, she forms surprisingly close relationships with various Indian captors, and, as in other texts of this kind, the possibility of interracial desire surfaces in this narrative. Instances of genuine affection, sometimes even leading to marriage, between captive and captor disrupt the accepted view of coercive master/slave relations.

Chapter two, "Desire and Duty: The Exercise of Feminine Agency in Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*," considers Sedgwick's nineteenth-century novel, which describes conflicts between Puritan colonials and American Indians. Sedgwick's novel features multiple captivity scenarios, involving imperiled yet rebellious female captives. *Hope Leslie* presents radical revisions of typical gender roles; for example, Sedgwick's female characters defy typical norms of feminine behavior by flagrantly disobeying male authority figures and by violating prohibitions on interracial romances. Yet, on the narrative level of Sedgwick's novel, strategies of seduction function more conservatively to confuse questions of coercion and consent in regard to displacement of American Indians.

In chapter three, "Designs of Her Own: A Perilous Journey from Slave Girl to Free Woman," I consider Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a vivid narrative of resistance and eventual liberation from captivity in the slaveholding South. Jacobs critiques yet nevertheless utilizes romance conventions to reveal the limits of seduction in a racist culture. More so than in the historical or fictional Indian captivity narratives, Jacobs represents herself as deliberately manipulating the desire of her master in order to gain small freedoms for herself. My emphasis on evaluating

the degree to which Jacobs represents herself as complicit in various scenarios of seduction clarifies the questions that arise in relation to certain silences surrounding sexuality and to her prolonged captivity. In Jacobs's text, there is a discrepancy between her frequent portrayal of her master as a suitor for her affections, as if he were in a position of weakness, and the historical reality of the brutal inequality of master/slave relations. Jacobs describes herself as participating in the narrative of seduction for strategic reasons: whereas a slave cannot easily rebuff her master, at the level of narrative representation the beloved can reject her suitor. Without her submission to his will, his dominion over her cannot be confirmed, implying a psychic dimension to the struggle between master and slave. I also investigate the generic classification of captivity literature with respect to the motifs of seduction in sentimental and domestic novels; in this chapter, seduction is analyzed primarily as a mode of amorous pursuit, and Jacobs stresses that seduction as such is inextricably related to power relations, revealing an aggressive underside to erotic relations.

Chapter four, "What Does a Woman Want: Desire and Seduction in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," also takes up the provocative issues of sexuality and consent, and it can be read as staging the problem of seduction through the depiction of the complicity of the narrator, Offred, in her servitude as a handmaid. Through her exposure of the falsity and emptiness of scripted roles of seduction, Atwood addresses the question of how to express desire; she suggests that creating better ways of expressing desire both in new symbolic forms and through different gender expectations would offer a means of stepping out of a purely passive position of compliance. While the situations of women in Atwood's and Jacobs's texts are by no means equivalent, various structures of oppression are operating in similar ways in each of the societies depicted; women are subjected to sexual exploitation, spatial confinement, rigorous surveillance, and dehumanizing treatment as objects, or more



precisely, as the property of their masters. The historical and the imagined captivity scenarios depicted by Jacobs and Atwood respectively revolve around the phenomenon of seduction, and they reveal the entanglement of desire and agency. Both texts deploy seduction to argue for the liberation of women's agency and desire through a challenge to oppressive structures of authority and, at least in the case of Atwood's novel, even to the symbolic order. Atwood engages with the seduction fantasy through the depiction of Offred's obedience to authority figures, which allows her to avoid taking any responsibility for her own desire by simply submitting to their commands; Offred attempts to make the Other responsible both for the *jouissance*, or the unanchored drive, at work within her and for placing a limit on this *jouissance*.

The final chapter, "The Dissolution of the Dynamic of Domination and Submission in Réage's *Story of O*: The Writing of *Jouissance* on O's Body," is also concerned with rituals of seduction and with the manipulation of the master's desire, but the novel's heroine, O, like Offred, willingly submits to enslavement, raising questions about the motives lying behind her submission. In contrast to the political circumstances of historical servitude, O submits to her enslavement through a masochistic contract with her masters, and this text presents the most dramatic and definite example of a consenting captive, allowing me to untangle the complicated relationship between femininity and masochism in psychoanalytic theory. As in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the portrayals of voluntary servitude, especially the scenes of sexual submission, are depicted in explicitly erotic and pornographic terms, which allows me to further my interrogation of the forms and expressions of feminine desire and speech. Réage presents the feminine position as one of passivity to question feminine subjectivity and its problematic relationship to agency and to the symbolic order, especially with respect to language. Just as Atwood does, Réage responds to the challenge of representing a woman's desire and speech in language by exposing the

limitations of the signifying abilities of language and by moving toward ways of expressing feminine desire that are not trapped in the mode of assuming the status of object for the Other. Réage is interested in circumventing the symbolic order and in exploring other modes of signification that do not necessarily alienate the subject by placing him or her in the discourse of the Other. In *Story of O*, we see that O is a captive of language, as well as a slave to her masters, and similar to the way that a bodily symptom speaks in the hysteric's discourse, O's body functions as a means of signification. The seduction scenarios and explicit sexual scenes raise questions about femininity and masochism, calling for a revisiting of psychoanalytic theories of femininity, especially with respect to Freud's theories on the associations among femininity, passivity, and masochism. Analysis of this text affirms my argument that the captive's ability to act as an agent of her own will is subject to both external and internal constraints: the orders of her captors, various historical and material conditions, and her unconscious fantasies, especially her relationship to the psychical Other.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Seduction and Subversive Desire in Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*

It was a strange and amazing dispensation, that the Lord should so afflict his precious Servant, and Hand maid. It was a strange, if not more, that he should so bear up the spirits of his Servant under such bereavements and of his handmaid under such captivity, travels and hardships (much too hard for flesh and blood) as he did, and at length deliver and restore.

From "The Preface to the Reader" of *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*

*Heb. 12.6. For whom the **Lord** loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth.*

From "The Twentieth Remove" of *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*

The epigraphs above advance a religious interpretation of the captivity experience of Mary Rowlandson, which she recounted in *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682). The epigraph from "The Preface to the Reader" was most likely authored by the Puritan minister, Increase Mather, and it reflects an orthodox Puritan understanding of God as the sole source not only of affliction and trial but also of redemption and salvation.<sup>8</sup> The excerpt from the preface abrogates agency from Rowlandson and attributes it exclusively to God the Father; as God's handmaid,

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<sup>8</sup> Many scholars speculate that Mather wrote the preface; see, for instance, Faery pp. 41-43, Salisbury pp. 44-45, and Toulouse pp. 5, 9.

Rowlandson passively submits to “travels and hardships (much too hard for flesh and blood),” as the preface puts it. According to the orthodox view espoused in the preface readers should interpret the fact of Rowlandson’s survival as evidence of God’s power and mercy toward her, a lesson that she and other readers of her text should be ever mindful of. The preface goes to great lengths to assure the reader that Rowlandson is indeed a faithful handmaiden of the Lord, and it instructs the reader on how to interpret her captivity and redemption. The second epigraph from Letter to the Hebrews points to the possibility of masochistic desire and pleasure in Rowlandson’s text; the Lord’s punishment is a sign of his love, which eroticizes the victim’s suffering. The possibility of masochistic desire and pleasure is hardly one that would have been openly acknowledged by the Puritan community, but it is nonetheless a strong thread in Rowlandson’s text.

In her poem, “Captivity,” Louise Erdrich creatively responds to Rowlandson’s narrative, and she invents a line that could have appeared in Rowlandson’s text, which she uses as an epigraph to her poem:

*He (my captor) gave me a bisquit, which I put in my pocket, and not daring to eat it, buried it under a log, fearing he had put something in it to make me love him.*

—from the narrative of the captivity of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, who was taken prisoner by the Wampanoag when Lancaster, Massachusetts, was destroyed, in the year 1676 (epigraph to Erdrich’s poem, “Captivity”)

Although Erdrich’s poem is a creative response to Rowlandson’s text, she taps into very real anxieties expressed by various members of the Puritan community about the possible seduction of Rowlandson by her Indian captors. As Erdrich’s epigraph and the rest of her poem suggest, Rowlandson’s actions during her captivity and her reflections on it in her narrative stray from the posture of strict obedience and

submission to God's will. The fictional Rowlandson imagined in the epigraph of Erdrich's poem may have been right to bury her master's biscuit for fear of love potions in it; that is, she may well have been seducible. One cannot literally find the line that Erdrich uses as an epigraph for her poem in Rowlandson's text, but Erdrich is responding creatively to the real temptation of seduction that permeates Rowlandson's narrative.

Rowlandson's Indian captivity narrative and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's historical romance novel, *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, both stage multiple seduction scenarios, at the levels of narrative, plot, and thematics, in which issues concerning sexuality and politics converge in the figure of the female captive. Although Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* was published in 1827, it is set in the early 1630s to the 1640s, which is about forty years earlier than Rowlandson's narrative. While Rowlandson's narrative arises out of Metacom's War of 1675-1676, Sedgwick's novel offers a revisionist account of the Pequot War of 1637, the first large-scale conflict between settlers and Indians. *Hope Leslie* presents multiple captivity scenarios, including native and non-native captivities, and, like Rowlandson, Sedgwick is anxiously preoccupied with the ability of both native and non-native characters to cross cultural boundaries as a result of captivity. To varying degrees, Rowlandson's and Sedgwick's texts struggle with the task of representing the relations between Anglo-American settlers and American Indians, but both of them, though not always convincingly or consistently, offer an argument in support of a racially homogenous community, in which one can only love those who resemble oneself.

In *The Captive's Position: Female Narrative, Male Identity, and Royal Authority in Colonial New England*, Teresa Toulouse explains that Puritan ministers were simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by "the border crossings they have

expended so much energy in condemning as seduction” (161). Along with border crossing, sexual seduction is featured as a dangerous possibility in Rowlandson’s and Sedgwick’s texts, and seduction especially brings into focus a confrontation between a woman’s desire and a figure of patriarchal authority. In various stages of Freud’s theory of seduction, we see that the roles of seducer and seduced are unstable and shifting, as his theory oscillates between the poles of material and psychic reality. The tension and oscillation in the roles of seducer and seduced create a limited space for the exercise of feminine agency and the emergence of feminine desire; thus, the dynamics of domination and submission within seduction structurally provide an opportunity for locating feminine agency and desire even within the oppressive confines of the social and religious hierarchy of the Puritan community. Although women were assigned to subordinate and submissive positions, the exigencies of the captivity situation allow for women to call into question (even if inadvertently) aspects of the social structure, including assumptions about race and about women’s passivity in the face of the desire of various father figures. The reaction of male authorities in each of the women’s texts examined in chapters one and two reveals considerable anxieties about women in the public sphere. The trial of Anne Hutchinson in 1637 and the Salem witch trials of 1692 revolve around the construction of woman as dangerous seductress, a figure who must be cast out of the public sphere; in the case of both Rowlandson’s narrative and Sedgwick’s text, we see that male figures are similarly vexed by the problem of women’s public roles. Male authorities attempt to guide the reception of Rowlandson’s text and to control the actions of female characters in Sedgwick’s novel, respectively, but especially in regard to Rowlandson’s text, the ruptures in her narrative disrupt orthodox religious and cultural ideologies and offer an subversive model of feminine agency and desire.

If one definition of seduction is to lead one from the path of righteousness, then Rowlandson cannot be said to have been seduced away from her home and her privileged role as wife of the Puritan minister, Joseph Rowlandson, of Lancaster, Massachusetts. Instead, she is dragged from her burning home in a chaotic and violent siege conducted by Nipmuc, Narragansett, and Wampanoag Indians on February 20, 1676. She spent the next three months moving throughout the harsh and desolate winter landscape in the conflict known as Metacom's, or King Philip's War, of 1675-1676. Her narrative is organized into a series of twenty "removes," and it recounts the physical, mental, and spiritual anguish that she experienced while moving from one encampment to another during her captivity.

The removal from the Rowlandson garrison occurs under conditions of duress: "But out we must go, the fire increasing, and coming along behind us, roaring, and the Indians gaping before us with their Guns, Spears and Hatchets to devour us" (69). Rowlandson relates that only one of the thirty-seven people at the garrison escaped death or captivity, and Rowlandson was wounded by a bullet that both goes through her side and fatally wounds her youngest daughter, Sarah, whom she is carrying in her arms. Rowlandson recounts "some wallowing in their blood" (69) and a particularly gruesome case of someone "chopt into the head with a Hatchet, and stripped naked, and yet was crawling up and down" (70). The text records Rowlandson's many moments of horror and astonishment; not only in regard to her own actions and emotions, but also in regard to the behavior of her Indian captors toward her. Having just witnessed the slaughter of various friends and family members, Rowlandson expresses surprise at her own desire to live, as she remarks: "I had often before this said, that if the *Indians* should come, I should chuse rather to be killed by them than be taken alive, but when it came to the tryal my mind changed; their glittering weapons so daunted my spirit, that I chose rather to go along with those (as I may say) ravenous

Beasts, than that moment to end my dayes ...” (70). Faced with the reality of this traumatic event, Rowlandson realizes that her “mind changed” (70), as she now prefers life to death.

Rowlandson was eventually ransomed, or “redeemed,” as she might say, and she reiterates her belief in the superiority of her own culture and religion throughout her text. Yet, her professions of loyalty to her culture are undermined, at least to some extent, by her actual experiences during her captivity and by her interactions with her captors. Rowlandson attempts to interpret her captivity in terms of providential Puritan theology, but it is evident that she often finds it difficult to match her experience to a religious explanation even though she may not explicitly say so.<sup>9</sup> Many critics have discussed these textual ruptures which are communicated through the irrepressible and even rebellious female voice that often comes through in an uncensored fashion despite the strong influence of her Puritan faith and of Puritan ministers who attempted to guide the contemporary audience’s reception of her text.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the preface, a sermon preached by her husband in 1678, “The Possibility of God’s Forsaking a People, That have been visibly near and dear to Him,” was appended to her captivity narrative, and the book-ending of her text by the texts of two ministers both bestowed an air of authority on her narrative and at the same time revealed male anxieties about granting a woman authority to appear in public, even if only metonymically through her text.

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<sup>9</sup> Numerous scholars comment on Rowlandson’s desire to see her captivity through the lens of Puritan theology, and its ultimate failure to explain her unsettling experience. For a sampling of this, see Faery p. 31 and Burnham p. 15-18.

<sup>10</sup> See Faery’s discussion of the two voices in Rowlandson’s text pp. 30-31, 41.



Scholars speculate that Rowlandson composed her narrative well-before it was published in 1682,<sup>11</sup> and the author of the preface informs the reader that the narrative circulated privately before its publication:

This narrative was penned by the Gentlewoman her self, to be to her a memorandum of Gods dealing with her, that she might never forget, but remember the same, and the severall circumstances thereof, all the dayes of her life. A pious scope which deserves both commendation and imitation: Some friends having obtained a sight of it, could not but be so much affected with the many passages of working providence discovered therein as to judge it worthy of publick view, and altogether unmeet that such works of God should be hid from present and future Generations: And therefore though this Gentlewomans modesty would not thrust it into the Press, yet her gratitude unto God made her not hardly perswadable to let it pass, that God might have his due glory and others benefit by it as well as herself. I hope by this time none will cast any reflection upon this Gentlewoman, on the score of this publication of her affliction and deliverance. (65-66)

Neither is glory to accrue to Rowlandson and nor is blame to be cast upon her for publishing the narrative because she is not publicly relating her narrative for her own aggrandizement but for the Lord's. The issue of her text circulating publicly was especially controversial because woman's speech, whether verbal or written, was highly regulated in Puritan New England; the most famous example of a female orator in New England is Anne Hutchinson. In 1637 Hutchinson was banished from the

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<sup>11</sup> See Salisbury for an overview of the debate surrounding the date of the narrative's composition, pp. 40-41.

Massachusetts Bay Colony after being tried for the heresy of antinomianism; she claimed that she experienced direct divine revelation from God concerning her salvation, denying the role of the clergy and of the church to mediate between an individual and God. Prior to her banishment, Hutchinson was a popular preacher of sorts. Neal Salisbury reports that “most churches had ceased allowing women to speak publicly in any capacity” after Hutchinson’s trial and exile from the colony (9). In her study of women’s roles in Puritan New England, Lonna Malmsheimer exposes the extreme subordination of women to men; her comments about women’s roles in public and religious life are especially pertinent to this discussion: “the principle of subjection dictated that women should not participate in public affairs. . . . Although allowed [church] membership, they were not permitted to speak in meeting because they were prone to doctrinal error and to seducing others into error” (486). The woman’s voice is potentially threatening in its seductive power, and the publication of Rowlandson’s text was risky because, despite the claims of the Puritan ministers and many of Rowlandson’s own statements, her text significantly contradicts orthodox Puritan doctrine and their beliefs in Indian savagery. Rowlandson’s narrative was tremendously popular in New England, as well as in England, quickly selling out and going through numerous editions;<sup>12</sup> thus, according to the logic of woman as seductress, it had far-reaching potential to seduce many readers.

A dominant religious myth condemned women for their supposed role as seductress; a view based on the Biblical story of Eve seducing Adam in the Garden of Eden. Of course, even then Eve’s seduction of Adam is secondary to her original seduction by the devil in the guise of the snake. Women were seen as more

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<sup>12</sup> See Salisbury pp. 48-49 for a summary of the text’s publication history. Toulouse also a useful account of political and historical factors influencing the printing and publication of the text; see pp. 22-25 and p. 34. For a consideration of gender issues in relation to the narrative’s publication, see Faery p. 43, and Burnham p. 25. Aside from Anne Bradstreet’s poetry, Puritan woman did not publish texts.

susceptible to others' desires, and yet somehow also more responsible for seducing others. Building on the work of Carol Karlsen, Teresa Toulouse explains the use and deployment of the term seduction in colonial New England:

As a number of historians have demonstrated, a concern with physical seduction, also termed fornication, permeates New English culture and law from the 1640s on, coming to a head during the 1690s, the period not only of the Salem witch trials, but also of almost continuous border warfare and captivity. In her study of New England witchcraft, Carol Karlsen notes that while laws existed that argued for the equal punishment of men and women in cases of seduction, over time these laws had become increasingly and more severely applied to female than to male offenders. (142)

In addition, Karlsen reports that throughout the 1690s women were more frequently executed for infanticide arising from instances of fornication (qtd. in Toulouse 8), and the witchcraft trials were one sign of the settlers' fear of the possibility of sexual seduction.

As has already been discussed, the preface assures the reader of Rowlandson's "modesty" (65), and Rowlandson explicitly addresses the issue of her chastity on numerous occasions in her narrative. It is likely that Rowlandson was responding to stories concerning her sexual experiences during her captivity, as Salisbury explains: "Shortly after her capture, Nathaniel Saltonstall, a prolific chronicler of the war, took pains in one of his reports to dispel a rumor that Rowlandson had been forced to marry Monoco, the Nashaway Nipmuc known to the English as One-eyed John" (43). Attributing the preservation of her chastity to God, Rowlandson nevertheless admits that she felt her position to be precarious: "And I cannot but admire at the wonderful power and goodness of God to me, in that, though I was gone from home, and met

with all sorts of *Indians*, and those I had no knowledge of, and there being no Christian soul near me; yet no one of them offered the least imaginable miscarriage to me” (84).<sup>13</sup> In the twentieth and final remove of her text, Rowlandson again stresses that she suffered no sexual violation during her captivity: “*I have been in the midst of those roaring Lyons, and Salvage Bears, that feared neither God, nor Man, nor the Devil, by night and day, alone and in company: sleeping all sorts together, and yet not one of them ever offered me the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action*” (107). Even though much of her narrative breaks down a civilized versus savage dichotomy, Rowlandson deploys negative stereotypical imagery of Indians toward the end of her narrative, perhaps to distance herself from her captors now that she has rejoined the Puritan community.

At earlier moments in her narrative, Rowlandson recounts various nights when she goes about from wigwam to wigwam, seeking shelter for the night; she writes of the “comfortable lodging” (87) she finds in the wigwam of an old Indian and “such kindness shewed me” (97), when an Indian woman gives her a mat and rug to sleep on. A few days before her release her master, Quinnapin, a Narragansett sachem, gets drunk, but, in Rowlandson’s words, “he drank to me, shewing no incivility” (104). Although colonists feared that captives would be raped by Indian captors, the historical record proves that this was not the case, and it was certainly not the case with respect to Rowlandson.<sup>14</sup>

While there is no evidence and no reason to believe that Rowlandson was raped during her captivity, traces of possible seduction manifest themselves in Rowlandson’s generous portraits of her Indian master, Quinnapin, and of Metacom,

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<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the emphasis is Rowlandson’s own. In general, italicized words and sentences indicate dialogue, Indian words, or Biblical quotations.

<sup>14</sup> Salisbury notes that “there is no record of any sexual violation of captive women by Native Americans anywhere in eastern North America” (107). See also Toulouse p. 66.

the Wampanoag leader whom the settlers called King Philip. Rowlandson refers to Quinnapin as “the best friend that I had of an *Indian*” (86), and she consistently portrays her relations with him as amicable. Rowlandson assumes a number of different roles while she is a captive; she is a commodity as her freedom will be brought for a fixed price, she is a servant of sorts to Quinnapin’s wife, Weetamoo, a powerful Wampanoag leader in her own right, and, simultaneously even if a bit contradictorily, she is an independent trader within the Indian community as she knits items in exchange for money and food. Having received some food in exchange for knitting stockings, Rowlandson prepares a meal and “invited [her] master and mistress [sic] to dinner” (83), and she happily gives her master a knife that she earned through her knitting skills. Despite her many protestations that God alone bears her up during her captivity, it is clear that she is highly adaptable and resourceful, finding shelter for herself, bartering her domestic skills for food, and forming a friendship of sorts with her master.

Upon Rowlandson’s first meeting with Metacom, he invites her into his wigwam and offers her tobacco, a gesture of hospitality, and he later shows her other kindnesses that, at least, psychologically ease her burdens. Physically exhausted from the ceaseless marching that the Indians and their captives have been doing to elude the colonial forces, Rowlandson writes that she nearly collapsed while crossing through a swamp “up to the knees, in mud and water” (96). In a seamless transition, Rowlandson moves from quoting Scripture to narrating a surprisingly intimate encounter with Metacom:

Being almost spent, I thought I should have sunk down at last, and never gat out; but I may, as in Psal. 94.18. *When my foot slipped, thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.* Going along, having indeed my life, but little spirit, *Philip* [Metacom], who was in the Company, came up and

took me by the hand, and said, *Two weeks more and you shall be Mistress again*. I asked him, if he spake true? He answered, Yes, *and quickly you shall come to your master again* [Quinnapin]; who had been gone from us three weeks. (96)

Surely, Rowlandson does not intend to publicly commit blasphemy by suggesting that Metacom takes the place of the Lord. But, it is indeed Metacom, who, in the flesh, provides her with bodily support. The movement from one sentence to the next, along with the paired gestures of “*held me up*” and “took me by the hand” implicitly place Metacom in the Lord’s role. The action of taking her hand to console her suggests a familiarity and fondness that is quite surprising given the expected situation of coercion inherent to captivity. If Rowlandson is meant to be nothing more than a cipher for the Lord’s will during her captivity, then blasphemy is lurking just below the surface of the official interpretation and endorsement of her text as an example of God the Father’s dealings with his handmaid.

The way in which Rowlandson relates Metacom’s news of her impending reunion with Quinnapin implies that her reunion with her master provides her with comfort, and her candid expression of her pleasure of being reunited with him is extraordinary given the fact of her Puritan upbringing and of the likely Puritan audience of her text. Immediately after the long passage quoted above, Rowland writes:

After many weary steps we came to *Wachuset*, where he [Quinnapin] was: and glad I was to see him. He asked me, *When I washt me?* I told him not this month, then he fetcht me some water himself, and bid me wash, and gave me the Glass to see how I lookt; and bid his *Squaw* give me something to eat: so she gave me a mess of Beans and meat, and a

little Groundnut Cake. I was wonderfully revived with this favour shewed me. (96)

Quinnapin's solicitude for Rowlandson is another sign of their friendship, and his personal involvement in fetching the water and bringing a mirror to her shows his concern for her. The ambiguity of the phrase, "this favour shewed me" (96), suggests that it is as much Quinnapin's attentions toward her as it is the actual material goods that lift her spirits.

Metacom and Quinnapin each demonstrate considerable sympathy for Rowlandson's plight as a captive, and her good-natured relationships with these powerful political leaders is subversive on many levels. First of all, the act of befriending a man other than her husband would have constituted a scandal in itself among the Puritan community, and the racial difference would have made their relationship even more transgressive. While Rowlandson is eager to receive word of her husband, Metacom and Quinnapin figure far more prominently in the narrative than her own husband. In fact, Rowlandson's most significant reference to her husband emphasizes her emotional and mental distance from him:

Hearing that my Son was come to this place, I went to see him, and told him his Father was well, but very melancholy: he told me he was as much grieved for his Father as for himself; I wondered at his speech, for I thought I had enough upon my spirit in reference to my self, to make me mindless of my Husband and every one else: they being safe among their Friends. (89)

Rowlandson endures conditions of near starvation, extreme cold, physical exhaustion, and emotional and spiritual distress, and she is definitely justified in focusing on her own tribulations. Her son, Joseph Jr., is also a captive, suffering from illness, cold, and hunger just as his mother is, and it seems implausible that he could really be "as

much grieved for his Father as for himself” (89). Rowlandson strikes the contemporary reader as being much more sensible and matter-of-fact in her view of the situation; however, given the strict gender hierarchies which regulated Puritan familial and social life, it is highly unusual for a Puritan wife to admit to being “mindless of my Husband” (89). Toulouse comments on the Puritan belief in a “divinely mandated” social and gender system which “not only ordered that woman be subservient to man within the marriage covenant; it also dictated that the marriage covenant itself be used as the basis for explaining and justifying all other social covenants” (7). Thus, Rowlandson’s formation of close relationships with her male captors and her confession of remoteness from her husband indicate that she experienced a loosening of the bonds of Puritan patriarchal ideology while a captive. Because the entire edifice of the social structure rests on the marriage covenant, Rowlandson’s troubling of the Puritan hierarchy poses a significant threat to the social order as a whole.

From a political standpoint, Rowlandson’s obvious attachment to her male captors is controversial because they were the declared enemies of the settlers. After the war ended, both Metacom and Quinnapin were killed by the Anglo-Americans or by their allies, and the corpses were subject to ignominy and abuse, including the decapitation and dismemberment of Metacom and the public hanging of Quinnapin (Salisbury 35-37). Metacom’s head was exhibited for a number of years in Boston, and Quinnapin and other Indian leaders “were publicly hanged with great fanfare” (Salisbury 37). Rowlandson’s humane portrayal of the high profile American Indian opposition leaders is astonishing given the cruel treatment inflicted on them by the colonial authorities. Although her narrative is not traitorous, it is strange that a woman who has seemingly reintegrated herself into Puritan society to express such warmth for the foes of her home community. The sanctioning of her text by Puritan



ministers and Rowlandson's frequent citations of Scripture anxiously proclaim her loyalty to both the Puritan God and to the fathers of New England, but throughout the text, there are numerous passages that point to possibilities other than her blind obedience to male religious authorities. At a relatively early stage in her captivity, Rowlandson expresses her empathy with Lot's wife, the Old Testament figure who was turned into a pillar of salt as punishment for her disobedience of God: "I went along that day mourning and lamenting, leaving farther my own Country, and traveling into the vast and howling *Wilderness*, and I understood something of *Lot's Wife's Temptation, when she looked back*" (80). The selection of Lot's wife as the sole female Biblical figure referred to in her text, suggests that Rowlandson choose it because she recognized, on some level, her own transgressions. Just as Lot's wife paid a severe penalty for her offense, Rowlandson might fear punishment for the violation of gender, religious, and cultural codes that are evident throughout her narrative.

In *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst*, Christopher Castiglia examines a wide range of captivity narratives through the centuries, and he considers the phenomenon of captives who "go native" or adopt the ideals of their captives, arguing that women authors of such narratives often revise accepted views on identity and culture (6-7). Rowlandson, of course, did not "go native" as did other captives who will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. But, as the example of her friendship with her Indian captors illustrates, she diverges from Puritan orthodoxy, and other examples reveal that she diverges in more ways than one. For instance, Rowlandson does not outright criticize Puritan practices or institutions, but she does offer an implicit critique of the English army:

And here I cannot but take notice of the strange providence of God in preserving the heathen: They were many hundreds, old and young, some sick, and some lame, many had *Papooses* at their backs, the greatest number at this time with us, were *Squaws*, and they travelled with all they had, bag and baggage, and yet they got over this River aforesaid; and on *Munday* they set their *Wigwams* on fire, and away they went: on that very day came the *English* Army after them to this River, and saw the smoak of their *Wigwams*, and yet this River put a stop to them. God did not give them courage or activity to go over after us; we were not ready for so great a mercy as victory and deliverance; if we had been, God would have found out a way for the *English* to have passed this River, as well as for the *Indians* with their *Squaws* and *Children*, and all their Luggage: *Oh, that my People had hearkened to me, and Israel had walked in my ways, I should soon have subdued their Enemies, and turned my hand against their Adversaries,* Psal. 81. 13-14. (79-80)

The superimposition of a Biblical interpretation for the English army's failure to cross the river rings hollow, and, even in accordance with Rowlandson's interpretation, the army is still lacking "courage and activity to go over" (80). Rowlandson needs to interpret the army's failure to cross as an act of divine providence, but one suspects that she has a hard time convincing herself of this. Increase Mather used Rowlandson's narrative to call for a reform of what he saw as a decrease in spiritual rigor among second-generation Puritans; the Puritans were likened to the Israelites who disregarded the Father's will and who were punished for doing so.<sup>15</sup> Yet, one must have a fanatical level of faith not to see the logical inconsistencies in the

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<sup>15</sup> See Salisbury p. 45.

application of a Biblical interpretation to Rowlandson's captivity experience. Even if Rowlandson did not voice objections to the orthodox view of her captivity, her emphasis on the feeble condition of many of the Indians who did manage to cross the river insinuates that she felt the inconsistencies of this interpretation on some level.

At the end of her text, she revisits this scene of the river crossing, and it is tempting to hear irony in her statement that "[The Indians] could go in great numbers over, but the *English* must stop: God had an over-ruling hand in all those things" (105). Rowlandson comments on the Indians' scorn of "*the slowness, and dullness*" of the English army, and she records their sarcasm when they ask her about the army: "they asked me when I thought the *English* Army would come after them? I told them I could not tell: It may be they will come in *May*, said they" (105).

Scholars have frequently noted that captivity narratives raise questions about the construction and stability of cultural identities because the circumstances of captivity call into question assumptions about supposedly innate differences between various groups of people. Rowlandson's narrative also poses challenges to Puritan notions of identity in this respect in addition to its other subversive elements, such as her friendship with her male captors and her criticism of the army. Toulouse discusses the way in which seduction can be seen as a form of cultural-border crossing in reference to children of European settlers who have been captured by Indians and subsequently assumed Indian identities: "What the representations of Indianized children indicate is the literal fact as well as the cultural fear that colonials themselves are not just seducible, but seducible to cultural identities other than those offered by Europe" (149). Moreover, Rowlandson reserves her greatest scorn for Praying Indians, those who have converted to Christianity; she accuses them of deception and hypocrisy, suggesting her unease with the crossing of cultural boundaries. The extent to which Rowlandson is seducible to non-European identities is questionable, but there

are certainly examples of a disintegration of a strict line between native and non-native identities in her text.

In regard to her own conduct, Rowlandson does not assume Indian dress or an Indian identity, but she does sprinkle Indian words throughout her text, one sign of her knowledge of their culture. She also integrates into their community by using her sewing and knitting skills to participate in the barter economy of the Indian community. Yet, the most striking example of the destabilization of her identity lies in her portrayal of the leveling effects of starvation on both the captors and their captives. When Rowlandson and her family members are first taken by the Indians, she figuratively speaks of their capture as “a company of Sheep torn by Wolves” (70), thus placing the Indians in the role of ravenous and fierce animals. Interestingly enough, Rowlandson later applies the same lupine imagery to herself when she considers how starvation has affected her: “I cannot but think what a Wolvish appetite persons have in a starving condition: for many times when they gave me that which was hot, I was so greedy, that I shou’d burn my mouth, that it would trouble me hours after, and yet I should quickly do the same again” (93). Rowlandson narrates an even more unflattering occasion when she describes how she snatched a boiled horse’s foot from a starving English child, reporting that “savoury it was to my taste” (96). If the pathetic image of the child “sucking, gnawing, chewing and slobbering of it in the mouth and hand” evokes any compassion on her part, she makes no mention of it (96).

Once she has been reunited with her family and friends, Rowlandson makes a number of concluding remarks about her captivity, one of which is of special relevance to this discussion: “Though many times they would eat that, that a Hog or a Dog would hardly touch; yet by that God strengthened them to be a scourge to His People” (105). When she is no longer living among her captors, Rowlandson rhetorically separates herself from them by using the pronoun “they” instead of “we,”

as if the Indians were the only ones who had to eat repulsive food in order to survive. Previously, Rowlandson relates that some of her captors were surprised by her ability to eat bear and horse liver; one such occasion is both humorous and gruesome:

*What, says he can you eat Horse-liver? I told him, I would try, if he would give a piece, which he did, and I laid it on the coals to roast; but before it was half ready they got half of it away from me, so that I was fain to take the rest and eat it as it was, with the blood about my mouth, and yet a savory bit it was to me ...” (81)*

It is odd that Rowlandson lets these contradictions stand unremarked as she concludes her narrative, but they might be read as evidence of her insecurities about her own so-called savage behavior.

As the above passage illustrates, some of the most graphic and unfavorable portraits of Rowlandson concern images of consumption, and the fact of physical degradation is one of the issues that comes through most clearly in her narrative. In her poem, “Captivity,” Erdrich draws on the images of consumption depicted in Rowlandson’s narrative to pursue the idea of Rowlandson’s seduction by her Indian captors. Like the apple in the Garden of Eden, the “bisquit” mentioned in the poem’s epigraph is infused with a love potion that will precipitate Rowlandson’s fall. In the poem, Rowlandson’s resistance to the food offered by her captors lessens, and she eventually accepts food from her master, as seen in the third stanza:

I told myself that I would starve  
before I took food from his hands  
but I did not starve.  
One night  
he killed a deer with a young one in her  
and gave me to eat of the fawn.

It was so tender,  
the bones like the stems of flowers,  
that I followed where he took me.  
The night was thick. He cut the cord  
that bound me to the tree. (lines 20-30)

During the fourteenth remove, Rowlandson describes eating a fawn: “that one might eat the bones as well as the flesh, and yet I thought it very good” (93), but the poem departs from Rowlandson’s account with the description of the nighttime setting and the image of bondage and release associated with the tree. In the poem, the food offered to her does exert seductive powers. Her master feeds her the “tender” fawn (26), and “[she] followed where he took [her]” (28). We see the blurry line between coercion and consent typical of seduction in this passage; she willingly follows but only because of the food’s lulling influence. Under cover of darkness, the conditions are more conducive for seduction, and, although the imagery is elliptical, in the following stanza Erdrich hints at sexual encounter between the two: “He [her master] did not notice God’s wrath. / God blasted fire from half-buried stumps. / I hid my face in my dress, fearing He would burn us all / but this, too, passed” (35-38). As if she were guilty of a sin, she imagines God raining down fire, but she inexplicably escapes unscathed.

The sexual imagery depicting the relationship between Rowlandson and her master is contrasted with the impotence of her husband: “My husband drives a thick wedge / through the earth, still it shuts / to him year after year” (40-42). In the same stanza, Rowlandson is described lying in bed and recalling herself alone in the midst of her Indian captors; she is lying “on a Holland-laced pillowbeer” (45). As the only European manufactured item mentioned in the poem, the pillowbeer stands out among the poem’s natural imagery. Yet, the detail of the pillowbeer connects Rowlandson to

her master in the actual narrative: “When my master [Quinnapin] came home, he came to me and bide me make shirt for his *Papoos*, of a holland-laced Pillowbeer” (101). While the European cloth is evidence of the exchange of material goods among natives and Euro-American settlers, its significance for this discussion lies in the crucial connection that it establishes between Rowlandson and her master. In the final two stanzas of “Captivity,” Erdrich alludes to one of the most frequently discussed passages which appears at the conclusion of Rowlandson’s narrative:

I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is other wayes with me. When all are fast about me, and no eye open, but his who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past, upon the awfull dispensation of the Lord towards us; upon his wonderful power and might, in carrying of us through so many difficulties, in returning us in safety, and suffering none to hurt us. I remember in the night season, how the other day I was in the midst of thousands of enemies, & nothing but death before me: It is then hard work to perswade myself, that ever I should be satisfied with bread again. But now we are fed with the finest of the Wheat, and, as I may say, with honey out of the rock<sup>16</sup>” (111).

As a result of her captivity, Rowlandson experiences a persistent unease, and one symptom of this is her insomnia. By evoking the privacy of the nighttime bedroom setting in which Rowlandson makes her confession, Erdrich once more taps into the sexual undertones of the narrative in her rewriting of Rowlandson’s experience. Rowlandson’s concluding confession contains elements of both poetry and pathos, and

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 81:16.

it suggests that her transition from captivity back to her home culture was not entirely smooth, and perhaps not ever complete.

The themes of obedience and disobedience to the Father's will are raised by the allusion to Psalm 81:16, which recounts the Israelites' failure to submit to God's will and their subsequent misery because of their lack of obedience. According to this Psalm, an individual's suffering is entirely his or her own fault, and an end to the suffering can be achieved simply by heeding God's commands. The Israelites are promised the "finest of wheat" and "honey of the rock" if they submit to God's commands (Psalm 81.16), but the poem subverts the logic of the Psalm by taking the role of provider away from God. In the poem, Rowlandson is depicted beating "the earth" (54) and then "begging it to open / to admit me / as he was / and feed me honey from the rock" (55-58). The phrase "as he was" is ambiguous, but the lower-case "he" suggests that Rowlandson is referring to her Indian master, not God. It is her master who earlier feeds her the fawn, and, turning to her master for the impossible but desired honey, Rowlandson defies God's will. The text, perhaps unconsciously, records Rowlandson's struggle to submit her desires to God's desire and to forgo agency for the sake of God's sovereignty. Toulouse offers a similar argument in regard to John Williams's sermon, *God in the Camp* (1707): "[God's] power and legitimacy seem not only to demand but also to be grounded in His 'sons' giving up of their desires in order to share in and complete His desire. The Father cannot continue sovereign without their abrogation of their desire" (160). The paradox is, of course, that the Father is not sovereign if his power rests on the necessary surrender of his children's autonomy and desire.

As a devout Puritan woman, Rowlandson is not supposed to have desires of her own, other than to desire what God desires, though it is important to note that both



Puritan women and men were meant to inhabit a subordinate position before God.<sup>17</sup> In her study of Puritan sermons, Toulouse explains another way in which seduction and desire were understood within the Puritan community: “the preacher must also drive home the divine punishments in store for all those who are drawn to seduction or even now committing the secret and addictive sin of desiring anything other than the ‘Father’s’ desires” (145). However, God’s desire is often inscrutable and arbitrary, and the many references to Job in Rowlandson’s text vividly make this point. Job can discern no apparent causality for the afflictions that God sends; together with her son, Rowlandson likens their situation to that of Job: “now we may say, as Job, *Naked came I out of my Mothers Womb, and naked shall I return: The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, Blessed be the Name of the Lord*<sup>18</sup>” (81-82).

In “Seduction, Persecution, Revelation,” Jean Laplanche argues “that the concept of seduction is evident, and indeed almost omnipresent, in the Bible” (190), citing the temptation story in Genesis and Job’s suffering among others: “As far as enigmatic messages and seduction stories are concerned, Job provides us with a fine example” (191). Laplanche’s analysis of Job in relation to seduction introduces the element of address into this discussion of seduction; he emphasizes the message and the enigma that accompany the address (193, 196). Starting with the model of an adult and a child, Laplanche posits that the major elements of seduction are “the reality of the message and the irreducibility of the fact of communication,” a straightforward assessment which he quickly complicates by adding that “[the message] is opaque to its recipient and its transmitter alike” (169). To illustrate the complexity of the message and its transmission and reception, Laplanche recalls Freud’s discussion of the Wolf Man and the moment when the Wolf Man’s father takes his son on a walk to

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<sup>17</sup> I am drawing on Toulouse’s analysis of Puritan social and religious hierarchies; see p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Job 1:21.

see the animals copulating (170). Laplanche wonders if the father's motive could only be "an innocent stroll" (170). Rowlandson opens the door to questions about her unconscious with her confession of her sleeplessness, and if Laplanche's analysis of seduction in terms of the message and the enigma are applied to Rowlandson's situation, then we see that she confronts the challenge of decoding God's message that he communicates to her through her captivity experience.

Yet, the allusions to Job insinuate that one cannot decipher God's motives; one must simply accept them. The most readily available response to the unknowability of God's desire—the desire of the Other to situate the problem in psychoanalytic terms—is to assume a passive posture, to empty oneself of desire, to reduce oneself to the position of object. It is possible to read Rowlandson's assumption of the object position as evincing masochistic desire; on various occasions, she interprets her suffering as a means to a sought-after end—her salvation. The third epigraph quoted at the beginning of this chapter—*Heb. 12.6 For whom the **Lord** loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth*—appears at the end of Rowlandson's narrative.<sup>19</sup> The Lord's love and His chastening are grammatically equivalent in the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, and the punishment serves as a prerequisite to receiving salvation. According to Freud's "The Economic Problem of Masochism," masochistic fantasies can arise from guilty feelings, in which "the subject assumes that he has committed some crime (the nature of which is left indefinite) which is to be expiated by all these painful and tormenting procedures" (162). The equation of beating with love is also explored by Freud in his essay, "A Child is Being Beaten," in which the second and unconscious stage of the beating fantasy in girls is explained by Freud as a manifestation of the girl's sense of guilt that is related to her incestuous desire for her father: "This being beaten is now a meeting-place between the sense of

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<sup>19</sup> See Rowlandson p. 112.

guilt and sexual love. *It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for it...*" (108). The point is not to diagnose Rowlandson as suffering from repressed sexuality but to show the way in which an unconscious fantasy of seduction is at play in her narrative. By understanding her affliction as a sign of God's wrath, a wrath that is actually supported by his love for her, Rowlandson maintains her ego as an object of God's love.

In reference to Rowlandson's narrative, Marianne Noble argues that Puritan religious doctrine was a likely influence on women's expressions of longing for punishment: "Receptivity to masochism is linked to spiritual transcendence. The Protestant doctrine underlying this belief system is the notion of providence, according to which affliction is a manifestation of God's love, sent to force individuals to turn away from earthly comforts and toward heavenly support" (28). Noble focuses her study on both the eroticization of domination exercised through men's violent acts and its effects on women's fantasies about beatings and suffering, but, in the case of Rowlandson and the larger Puritan community, the desire for God's punishment as a coded sign for his love is not specific to women. In her discussion of social versus spiritual hierarchies, Toulouse points out that "the spiritual realm allowed for an equality based on men's inhabiting the passive, obedient, and humbled position before *God* that they ideally assigned to women before *them* in the secular realm" (7). Thus, in the context of Rowlandson's text and the religious framework of her community, there is no equation between masochistic desire and a feminine subject position, although the social role of the passive and submissive woman most likely facilitated men's identification with the captive woman in terms of a theological interpretation of captivity.

Confessing a sense of guilt, Rowlandson blames herself for her former lack of spiritual vigilance, and she claims that she understands the ordeals of her captivity as

penance for her sins. Observing the “tryals and afflictions” of others, Rowlandson writes “I should sometimes be jealous least [sic] I should have my portion in this life ...” (112), and then, after her captivity, she says, “Affliction I wanted, and affliction I had, full measure (I thought) pressed down and running over ...” (112). Perhaps the tone is a bit rueful, considering all she has endured, but she can at least claim her trials as a sign of God’s love. To read Rowlandson’s desire as masochistic is to uphold an orthodox interpretation of her captivity, one that is in line with the interpretation of her text offered by Puritan ministers because it bolsters their pleas for members of their congregations to practice stricter obedience to the Church. A more radical reading of Rowlandson’s narrative focuses on the chinks in the official interpretation of her text.

As we have seen, the preface and her husband’s sermon, which introduce and conclude her narrative respectively, reveal the desire of male authorities to control the reception and the message promulgated by Rowlandson’s narrative. Lest her text seduce others to blasphemous desires or erroneous doctrines, the ministers insist that Rowlandson’s desire must coincide with the father’s (both the minister’s and God’s). Yet, the dangerous possibility of Rowlandson’s seduction is never far below the surface; she acts independently in the Indian community during her captivity, she forms close relationships with two of her male captors, and her text discloses a number of ruptures in Puritan orthodoxy, all of which testify to the disruptive power of feminine desire unleashed on the traditional social and religious order. As Erdrich’s poetic response, “Captivity,” to Rowlandson’s narrative makes clear, the erotically charged moments between Rowlandson and her male captors, those that speak to the desire to be touched, to be seduced, suggest a more subversive model of feminine desire and agency that are present in her recounting of her captivity experience.

## CHAPTER TWO

Desire and Duty: The Exercise of Feminine Agency in Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*

“Liberty, what is it! Daughter of disloyalty and mother of all misrule—who, from the hour that she tempted our first parents to forfeit paradise, hath ever worked mischief to our race.”

Sir William Fletcher (*Hope Leslie*, 6)

In a letter to his brother, Sir William Fletcher pens the above epigraph; Sir William instructs his brother to be vigilant about guarding his son also named, William, from the influence of the Puritans. The epigraph's allusion to the story of the temptation and fall in the Garden of Eden myth introduces the novel's preoccupation with seduction, and Sir William fears that his free-thinking nephew might be seduced by the Puritans. Sir William wants to ensure the smooth transition of his considerable estate by seeing his daughter, Alice, marry his nephew, William, but this marriage is contingent upon William's adherence to the Anglican religion. The theme of disobedience to parental, or to be more specific *paternal*, authority is established with the story of William and Alice. The struggle between romantic love versus religious and political duties recurs throughout the novel, and, as it does in the case of William and Alice, religious and political commitments typically win out. Even though he is deeply in love with Alice, William is unwilling to compromise his religious principles in order to win his uncle's permission to marry Alice, and he resolves to “exile himself for ever from England” (11). Although *Hope Leslie* opens in England with a tale of thwarted love between these two young cousins, the setting quickly shifts to the

Puritan settlements in New England when the young William Fletcher sets sail in 1630 aboard the *Arabella* along with Governor Winthrop, a character based on the historical figure of the same name.

In the first instance of a long series of female characters disobeying their fathers, Alice attempts to join William on his voyage to England, but her father's guards seize her on the wharf just before she makes her escape. While obviously rewriting it in significant ways, this scene alludes to Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794), a classic eighteenth-century novel that tells of the seduction and abandonment of a naïve young woman, Charlotte, by a worldly and shrewd seducer. Unlike Alice, Charlotte is not carried from the wharf by her parents, and, after bearing an out-of-wedlock child, she dies a penitent death in New York. As a cautionary tale about the dangers of seduction, *Charlotte Temple* exemplifies how seduction novels strive to educate readers through the negative example of Charlotte's fate. Judith Fetterley argues that "Sedgwick defines *Charlotte Temple*, one of the most popular stories in America, even in 1827, as essentially un-American, a story of the old country, for whether dragged off by a seducer or dragged home by a father, women in stories like *Charlotte Temple* are subject to patriarchal control" (81). Certainly, it is true that many of the female characters in *Hope Leslie* resist overt forms of patriarchal control, but whether or not they actually escape from it is less clear.

Following upon her failed quest to follow William to the English colonies, Alice is coerced into marrying a man of her father's choosing "in the imbecility of utter despair" (12), but, after her husband's death, she leaves England for New England, along with her two daughters, Alice and Mary, later renamed Hope and Faith, respectively. In the meantime, William has been prevailed upon to marry Martha, a faithful and obedient Puritan woman whom he respects but never loves in the same way as he does Alice. Describing his love for Alice, William informs his

wife, Martha: ““It inspired every hope—modified every project—such was the love I bore to Alice—love immortal as the soul!—”” (19). During the same conversation, he expresses his feelings for Martha in markedly less passionate terms: ““And think you not that principle has preserved me faithful in my friendship to you? Think you not that your obedience—; your careful conformity to my wishes; your steady love ... can be lightly estimated?”” (19). Not long after this frank conversation between husband and wife, Martha writes a letter in which she again references her lesser status in her husband’s heart: “I have ever known that mine was Leah’s portion—that I was not the chosen and the loved one ...” (35). Sedgwick represents William and Martha’s marriage as a counter-example to the true love marriage, and she sets up their marriage as a foil to that of a marriage between their son, Everell, and Hope. In Sedgwick’s text, representations of marriage tend to privilege fondness that closely resembles sibling affection and that is based on a model of barely disguised incestuous unions. The fear of seduction as border crossing is evident in Sedgwick’s text as it is in Rowlandson’s text, and Sedgwick’s novel forcefully engages in an argument for constructing a U.S. national identity based on a white racial identity through her portrayal of various romances and marriages.

At the novel’s conclusion, Hope marries Everell Fletcher, and thus their parents’ ill-fated romance is finally realized in a quasi-incestuous union of their children. As her name suggests, Hope is confident and optimistic, and Sedgwick optimistically but not unproblematically represents New England as a place where the daughter can challenge, though not altogether dismantle, patriarchal authority. Unlike Charlotte Temple or her mother, Alice, Hope marries Everell of her own free will, but her will coincides perfectly with the desire of her stepfather, William Fletcher, that she marry his son. *Hope Leslie* utilizes and revises the typical eighteenth-century seduction plot of a young innocent woman seduced by the cunning and verbal

eloquence of a male seducer to suggest the problem with women's subordination to male authority, whether benevolent or malevolent. Sedgwick's novel seemingly offers a radical critique of the limitations of women's restricted roles in the social sphere and of the barriers standing in the way of women's personal and romantic desires, but the seductive designs of the novel ultimately consign feminine desire to a fulfillment of paternal desire, insisting that woman's desire can only coincide with a sanctioned desire of the father.

In her study of the motifs of seduction and incest in eighteenth and nineteenth-century American fiction, Elizabeth Barnes argues that the blurry line between fathers and lovers served to "perfect the conflation of familial, erotic, and social ties, at once legitimizing incestuous bonding and extending the parameters of patriarchal influence" (16). The central argument of Teresa Toulouse's analysis of captivity narratives is that anxieties about the seduction of captives by the Indians or French are interconnected with complex negotiations of Puritan leaders' authority in relation to the political and religious situations in the colonies as well as those in England and Europe. Shirley Samuels shows that the seduction narrative plays a key role in the mythology of the American Revolution: "While contemporary cartoons portray America [often in the figure of an Indian woman] as seduced from her mother Britain by the designing French, such iconographic seductions associate violence with not only the sexual but also the racial attributes of women who appear as metaphors for national identity" (9). In *Hope Leslie*, the seductive relations between fathers and daughters manifest themselves on a personal level in the fulfillment of the romantic aspirations of the parents through the marital union of the children. Just as Toulouse and Samuels make connections between politics and seduction with respect to earlier historical periods, so too does seduction operate in the political, as well as the personal, realm in *Hope Leslie*. In Sedgwick's novel, seductive scenarios are



inextricably tied to political situations, especially to the question of Indian Removal that dominated U.S. politics in the 1820s and 1830s.

From a feminist perspective, there is certainly much to admire in Sedgwick's creation of the spirited, independent, and often defiant characters of Hope Leslie and Magawisca, an eloquent defender of the Pequot nation. In their discussions of *Hope Leslie*, many critics applaud Sedgwick's portrayal of Hope and Magawisca because these characters challenge gender roles that prescribe passive and obedient feminine behavior through their confrontations with various father figures. For the English settlers, the colonies—at least according to Sedgwick's representation of them—offer tremendous opportunities to rebel against religious and political oppression, and, for the female settlers, they provide considerable opportunities to cast off gender oppression. Yet, the English settlers only enjoy this chance to rebel against the tyranny of the crown at the expense of the indigenous population; consequently, the racial politics of *Hope Leslie* are very conflicted. Despite the fact that Sedgwick goes far in her attempts to undermine a stereotypical binary between civilized Anglo-Americans and savage Indians, her text cannot envision racial equality within the boundaries of the historical Puritan community mainly because it is swayed by the crisis fomenting over Indian removal in the early-nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The controversy surrounding Indian removal was spurred on by the Cherokee case in Georgia, which ultimately led to the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. Passage of the act in both houses of Congress was fiercely contested, predominantly along partisan lines,<sup>21</sup> and it is also notable that the 1832 *Worcester v. Georgia* decision, authored by Chief Justice John Marshall, upheld Cherokee sovereignty.

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<sup>20</sup> According to Karcher, "Sedgwick never translated the sympathy for Indians expressed in her novel into political activism on their behalf" ("Introduction" to *Hope Leslie* xxxvii, xxxviii). However, Fetterley suggests that Sedgwick "may well have protested the Indian Removal Act of 1830" (93).

<sup>21</sup> See Perdue and Green's thorough summary of the debates over Removal in both houses (114-115).

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the degree to which Indian removal was contested, and various historical documents, including Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1836 letter protesting removal to President Martin Van Buren and Mary Jemison's captivity narrative, are more progressive in their calls for racial equality and justice than much of the fiction of the same period.<sup>22</sup>

Although Sedgwick offers a complicated account of Indian-white relations, especially in her willingness to indict Anglo-Americans for their treacherous conduct toward Indians, her fiction exhibits a tendency common to many dominant nineteenth-century texts in which Indians are depicted as a dying race.<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Blevins Faery makes an important argument in regard to many nineteenth-century frontier novels' representations of Indian removal by stressing the effects created by the distant colonial setting of these novels: "The remote *past* was a convenient stand-in for a remote *place* in these texts, all of which support in varying ways the popular idea of displacing Indians to make more room for white settlement" (192). Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is set during The Seven Years' War, which spanned the years 1756 to 1763, and Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* is set a century earlier, ranging from the early 1630s to the 1640s. Faery insightfully argues that the cultural work of such texts is to create the illusion that conflicts between settlers and Indians have already been resolved, which, in turn, absolves the contemporary reading audience from culpability in current government policies directed against American Indians (192).

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<sup>22</sup> In contrast to Emerson's letter and Seaver's *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, fiction by Cooper, Child, and Sedgwick, to name a few examples, subtly or not-so-subtly supports Indian removal in the interests of U.S. expansionist goals.

<sup>23</sup> With respect to the myth of a "Vanishing Race," various critics compare Cooper's works to Sedgwick's; for particularly useful comparisons, see Zagarell pp. 52-53, 55-60; Karcher pp. xx-xxi, xxvi of her "Introduction" to *Hope Leslie*; and Faery pp. 183-185. Romero also discusses the "'cult of the Vanishing American'" in relation to Cooper's works: "The elegiac mode here performs the historical sleight of hand crucial to the topos of the doomed aboriginal: it represents the disappearance of the native not just as natural but as having already happened" (115).

In her preface, Sedgwick stakes out her position on race and aligns herself with Enlightenment racial philosophies, which emphasize the role of culture over nature:

The liberal philanthropist will not be offended by a representation which supposes that the elements of virtue and intellect are not withheld from any branch of the human family; and the enlightened and accurate observer of human nature, will admit that the difference of character among the various races of the earth, arises mainly from difference of condition. (4)<sup>24</sup>

Privileging her stance as that of “the enlightened and accurate observer” (4), Sedgwick makes a case for the humanity of American Indians, and she concedes—perhaps in an attempt to preempt criticism—that not all of her readers will share her beliefs, which are those of the “liberal philanthropist” (4). Sedgwick’s assertion (even with its qualification—“mainly”) that variations among races result “mainly from difference of condition” is a bold declaration (4), although positions such as hers invariably had a Eurocentric bias because the desirability of indoctrinating natives in Western culture was taken for granted. Nevertheless, in her Preface, Sedgwick espouses progressive views on race for her day, but are these views actually upheld within the text, or are they misleading claims?

In many ways, Sedgwick’s portrayal of Magawisca supports her claim for racial equality; Magawisca embodies “the elements of virtue and intellect” praised by Sedgwick in her preface (4). Many critics focus on the similarities between Hope and Magawisca, frequently describing their relationship as one of sisters.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on

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<sup>24</sup> I am drawing on Horsman’s discussion of racial philosophies and politics in the years from 1815-1850 in my characterization of Sedgwick’s position as belonging to the Enlightenment tradition; see Horsman p. 190. Kelley offers further background information about nineteenth-century racial debates with respect to Sedgwick’s Preface; see p. xxix.

<sup>25</sup> In one of the most frequently cited instances of this, Zagarell dubs them “metaphorical sisters,” and she lists a number of connections between the two, concluding with the observation that “they are literal sisters-in-law, Hope’s sister Faith marrying Oneco” (56). In addition, I am drawing on Karcher’s

her clandestine meeting with Magawisca in the churchyard, Hope makes the following comment: “‘Mysteriously,’ she said, as her eye followed the noble figure of Magawisca, till it was lost in the surrounding darkness, ‘mysteriously have our destinies been interwoven. Our mothers brought from a far distance to rest together here—their children connected in indissoluble bonds!’” (201). Commenting on Sedgwick’s representation of Magawisca, Fetterley writes: “Magawisca is consistently described by images that suggest the ‘evening’ of life—something fading, disappearing” (93). Sedgwick repeatedly employs imagery of darkness to naturalize the disappearance of Indians from lands that are rapidly being appropriated by Anglo-Americans, and, in this scene, she bestows the power of the gaze upon Hope, who enjoys a position of mastery as she watches the erasure of the native presence. Although Hope and Magawisca develop a close friendship and exhibit similar behaviors, their different racial backgrounds eventually result in their permanent separation, and a comparison of their “‘interwoven’” yet divergent destinies reveals how racial hierarchies and colonial New England expansionist projects (201), as well as the contemporary removal crisis that was unfolding as Sedgwick was writing her novel, force the exclusion of Magawisca and other American Indians from white settlements.

Magawisca is the daughter of the once powerful Pequot chief, Mononotto, who previously has formed alliances with the English but now seeks vengeance after the bloody massacre of his people by the English in the conflict known as the Pequot War of 1637. Governor Winthrop makes a special pledge to Monoca, Magawisca and Oneco’s mother, to protect her children out of consideration for the fact that “[many] instances of [Monoca’s] kindness to the white traders are recorded ...” (21).

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characterization of Hope and Magawisca as “twinned heroines” (“Introduction” to *Hope Leslie*, xxi), Fetterley’s argument that Magawisca is the “‘real’ sister” (95), and Kelley’s proposal that they “serve as doubles, as sisters of the soul” (xxii).

Moreover, Magawisca informs Everell of the hospitality and friendship her father previously offers to the English: “[Mononotto] had been the friend of the English; *he* had counselled peace and alliance with them; *he* had protected their traders; delivered the captives taken from them, and restored them to their people ...” (51-52).

Sedgwick thus shows that peaceful relations once prevailed between Indians and settlers, but, in return for the Indians’ generosity, Governor Winthrop sends Magawisca and her brother, Oneco, to the Fletcher household at Bethel to assume the position of servants. They are fortunate in comparison to other Indians who were captured after the war and “sent into slavery in the West Indies” (21), as William informs Martha. Part of Magawisca’s nobility derives from her resistance to a role of servitude, as Martha says, “I have, in vain, attempted to subdue her to the drudgery of domestic service ...” (32). After Mononotto redeems his children from captivity, he instructs his son to change his clothing: “Mononotto tore from Oneco his English dress, and casting it from him—‘Thus perish, he said, ‘every mark of the captivity of my children’” (67). The treacherous treatment of the Pequot by the English brings about Mononotto’s deep bitterness and his quest for revenge.

In contrast to Mononotto’s unabated animosity toward the English, close relationships soon develop between Magawisca and Everell and between Oneco and Faith, suggesting that ties of affection in the younger generation can foster healing and forgiveness between these two groups. Oneco and Faith are virtually inseparable from the first moment of their acquaintance, and Everell and Magawisca likewise share a strong sympathy of mind and spirit. In a letter to William, Martha describes the mutual cultural exchange that Magawisca and Everell engage in: “She ... doth take much delight in describing to him the customs of her people, and relating their traditionary tales, which are like pictures, captivating to a youthful imagination. He hath taught her to read, and reads to her Spenser’s rhymes, and many other books of

the like kind” (32). The relationship between the two is characterized by reciprocity; at least on an interpersonal level, it conforms more to a romance narrative than to a seductive narrative. Conversely, on a cultural level, the relationship between the two could be condemned as seduction because they engage in crossing cultural boundaries. Although Magawisca is structurally in a disempowered position compared to Everell, their relations on a personal level are on a more equal footing, and neither one is attempting to win the others’ attractions through stratagems of any sort. The depiction of a developing romantic relationship between the two is quite radical because—albeit to a limited extent—Sedgwick depicts how being lead away from one’s own culture can be enlightening rather than threatening. However, this is a seductive possibility that she is only willing to pursue so far.

In the same letter, Martha goes on to confide her concern over the growing intimacy of Magawisca and Everell, and, since Faith and Oneco are both two young for romantic love at this point, the possibility of interracial desire is first raised with the older siblings. Using images from nature to show the spontaneity and sincerity of their attraction, Martha describes the interaction between Magawisca and Everell:

that innocent and safe as the intercourse of these children now is, it is for thee to decide whether it be not most wise to remove the maiden from our dwelling. Two young plants that have sprung up in close neighbourhood, may be separated while young; but if disjoined after their fibres are all intertwined, one, or perchance both, may perish.

(33)

According to Martha, there is simply no place for interracial marriage; in fact, she views it as potentially fatal for one or both of the children. Martha is acting out of concern for Magawisca in whom she detects the signs of a romantic attachment to Everell: “when I see her, in his absence, starting at every sound, and her restless eye

turning an asking glance at every opening of the door; every movement betokening a disquieted spirit, and then the sweet contentment that stealeth over her face when he appeareth ...” (33). Martha also observes that Magawisca produces similar feelings in Everell, and she believes the best course of action is to separate the two before a forbidden love fully develops between them.

As it turns out, Martha’s fears are resolved by a violent and tragic series of events. Nelema, an elderly Indian woman who lives near the Fletcher homestead, gives Martha a warning that danger is afoot by leaving a rattlesnake omen at her feet, which Magawisca interprets for Martha as ““the symbol of death”” (40). Suspecting her father may be preparing for a raid, Magawisca ventures into the nearby forest to seek information about her father’s plans. Upon her return, Magawisca meets Everell, and she utters an ominous pronouncement in regard to violent cycles of aggression and retaliation: ““Then listen to me; and when the hour of vengeance comes, if it should come, remember it was provoked”” (48). Magawisca is indisputably an eloquent and powerful spokeswoman for the Pequot nation, and Sedgwick grants her considerable narrative authority to contest the official versions of Puritan history, as critics such as Dana Nelson and Sandra Zagarell have shown.<sup>26</sup> Sedgwick announces her intention to grapple with historical events and figures in her preface, and, by granting Magawisca the power to narrate her own firsthand account of the massacre at Mystic, Sedgwick rewrites Puritan versions of the same events.<sup>27</sup> Zagarell asserts that “the novel challenges the official history of original settlement by exposing the repositories of the nation’s early history, the Puritan narratives, as justifications of genocide” (53).

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<sup>26</sup> See pp. 193, 195-197 of Nelson’s article, and see pp. 53-55 of Zagarell’s article.

<sup>27</sup> Gould’s article gives a comprehensive overview of issues surrounding the status of history in *Hope Leslie* and of the Puritan sources that Sedgwick drew on; foremost among these sources are John Winthrop’s *The History of New England* and William Hubbard’s *A Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New England*.

Magawisca's narration of the awful events of the Mystic massacre makes it clear that the Puritan attack was genocide: "Thus did the strangers destroy, in our own homes, hundreds of our tribe" (51). Magawisca provides copious details about the event, and the following excerpt is representative of the whole:

"No enemy's foot had ever approached this nest, which the eagles of the tribe had built for their mates and their young. Sassacus and my father were both away on that dreadful night. (48) ... Those fearful guns that we had never heard before—the shouts of your people—our own battle yell—the piteous cries of the little children—the groans of our mothers, and, oh! worse—worse than all—the silence of those that could not speak— ... Then was taken from our hearth-stone, where the English had been so often warmed and cherished, the brand to consume our dwellings. They were covered with mats, and burnt like dried straw." (50)

The Mystic fort is in a vulnerable state because the two chiefs, Sassacus and Mononotto, are away, and the advanced European weaponry overwhelms the Pequot. The suffering of the innocent is underscored by "the piteous cries of the little children—the groans of our mothers ..." (50). Magawisca also points out the bitter irony of the English burning the homes of those who had previously welcomed them with a "brand" from their "hearth-stone" (50). Nelson discusses the affective quality of Magawisca's narrative on Everell, noting that he cries after hearing her speak of the massacre; moreover, she stresses that "once one is conscious of the political aspect of historical representation, quite different versions can be constructed—versions more balanced and hence more accurate" (196). In her preface, Sedgwick refers to the "high-souled courage and patriotism" of the Indians (4), and Magawisca's narration of



the Mystic massacre complicates any assessment of the retaliatory massacre that occurs at the Fletcher homestead.

Shortly before the raid on Bethel, Magawisca is “racked with apprehensions, and conflicting duties, the cruellest rack to an honourable mind” (57). On the one hand, Magawisca feels allegiance to her father and her people; on the other hand, she wants to protect the Fletchers from harm, as the narrator explains, “Magawisca’s first impulse had been to reveal all to Mrs. Fletcher; but by doing this, she would jeopard her father’s life” (57). If she informs the Fletchers of the likelihood of an attack, she would be disobeying her father, as well as betraying the memory of those who died. The stakes of her dilemma are life and death for two groups of people who both have claims to her affection and loyalty. The male servants and Mr. Fletcher are away from the home when the assault begins, and Philip Gould comments on the significant parallels between the two massacres:

It is essential here to recognize that the Puritan attack at Mystic Fort and Mononotto’s revenge at Bethel are equivalent violations of the home. Sedgwick takes her cue from the sublimated guilt in both Puritan and early national accounts of the attack, which exhaustively defended Mason’s assault upon the one of two forts inhabited mostly by women and children. (650)

The violence and injustice of the Puritan’s attack is juxtaposed to the revenge attack staged by Mononotto and his Mohawk allies on the Fletcher home, which prevents simplistic moral judgments about the events.

Magawisca pleads for the lives of the Fletchers, but her father’s grief has transformed his formerly generous and trusting nature. He is now guided by a monomaniacal desire for revenge, and her cries fall on his deaf ears: “‘they have spread the wing of love over us—save them—save them—oh it will be too late,’ she

cried, springing from her father, whose silence and fixedness showed that if his better nature rebelled against the work of revenge, there was no relenting of purpose” (65-66). Even in this scene of bloody revenge, Sedgwick illustrates that there is still a streak of humanity left in Mononotto, as the Fletcher baby boy kindles his compassion: “Mononotto’s heart melted within him; he stooped to raise the sweet suppliant ...” (67). In true melodramatic fashion, it is but a brief reprieve for the baby because one of the Mohawks steps in and ruthlessly kills him, yet Sedgwick shows that Mononotto is not capable of such a monstrous act.<sup>28</sup> Magawisca’s first act of heroism is noted by one of the Mohawk warriors as she tries to defend Mrs. Fletcher by interposing her body between his hatchet and Mrs. Fletcher: “The warrior’s obdurate heart ... was thrilled by the courage of the heroic girl ...” (66). Significantly, Magawisca earns the admiration of the warrior because of her daring act of bravery; however, it is equally important that she does not act as an agent of violence. She earns praise for acting with the culturally-defined male virtue of courage, but she does not go so far as to transgress culturally-defined female virtue by violently attacking the warriors. Rather, Magawisca would be a martyr for Mrs. Fletcher’s sake: “‘You shall hew me to pieces ere you touch her,’ she said, and planted herself as a shield before her benefactress” (66). Despite the best efforts of Magawisca and Everell, Mrs. Fletcher, her daughters, and her baby son are murdered by Mononotto and his Mohawk allies.

As a result of the Bethel massacre, Everell and Faith are taken captive; Everell escapes relatively quickly through Magawisca’s intervention whereas Faith eventually marries Oneco. Mononotto plans to kill Everell as retribution for the death of Samoset, his brave and beloved son who was killed by the English. Although

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, Sedgwick is significantly rewriting a similar scene in *The Last of the Mohicans*; see Karcher pp. xx-xxi of her “Introduction” to *Hope Leslie* and Zagarell pp. 52-53.

Magawisca desperately tries to persuade him otherwise, Mononotto is unyielding on this matter, and she recognizes the futility of further argument with him: “Magawisca must feel, or feign submission; and she laid her hand on her heart, and bowed her head in token of obedience” (78). However, Magawisca, in actuality, does not submit so readily to her father’s wishes; she is constantly on the alert for a chance to facilitate Everell’s escape. At one point, Digby and some other English men are so close to Mononotto and his captives that a call for help would surely reach the rescuers, but the cost of the call for help would be her father’s likely imprisonment and death:

“[Magawisca’s] heart had again been rent by a divided duty; one word from her would have rescued Everell, but that word from her would have condemned her father; and when the boat retired, she sunk to the ground, quite spent with the conflict of her feelings” (83). At this moment, Magawisca’s romantic feelings for Everell must be subordinated to her father’s authority and to her national allegiance, leaving her frustrated and near despair with the plethora of bad choices that she faces.

Arguably, the most dramatic and, what Mary Kelley calls “the most heroic act in the entire novel” (xxvii), occurs when Magawisca abruptly intervenes in the imminent revenge killing of Everell by thrusting her body between Mononotto’s descending hatchet and Everell. After escaping from the guard whom her father appoints to keep her from interfering in the execution, Magawisca scales the mountain to reach the sacrifice rock just in time to save Everell:

The chief raised the deadly weapon, when Magawisca, springing from the precipitous side of the rock, screamed—“Forbear!” and interposed her arm. It was too late. The blow was leveled—force and direction given—the stroke aimed at Everell’s neck, severed his defender’s arm, and left him unharmed. The lopped quivering member dropped over

the precipice. Mononotto staggered and fell senseless, and all the savages, uttering horrible yells, rushed toward the fatal spot. (97)

Although everyone is momentarily stunned by her daring intervention, Magawisca is the first to recover her senses, telling Everell to flee. Oddly enough, the nature of their relationship is transformed by this sudden event: “He threw his arms around her, and pressed her to his heart, as he would a sister that had redeemed his life with her own, and then tearing himself from her, he disappeared” (97). As we have previously seen, a romance is budding between the two, but now their relationship is described in terms of sibling affection, as the phrase “as he would a sister” connotes (97). Sedgwick, in a seemingly arbitrary fashion, prevents this interracial romance from coming to fruition by making Magawisca’s redemption of Everell’s life cause her to lose the possibility of ever becoming his wife. While Magawisca’s action is heroic because it saves the life of an innocent character (significantly, this scene also reverses the dominant pattern of a man rescuing a woman),<sup>29</sup> her heroism exacts a heavy cost – she loses an arm and Mononotto experiences a severe breakdown after grievously wounding his own daughter.

The description of the severed arm as a “lopped quivering member” (97) sounds more like castration than an amputation, and this act of eroticized violence is perpetrated by the father. According to the Oedipal myth, castration is a threat uttered by the father as a punishment for incestuous wishes for the mother, and, according to a Lacanian revision of the castration complex, castration is tied to alienation in language and to prohibitions instituted by rules of social co-existence. The castrating wound that Magawisca receives does function as a punishment for transgressing her father’s wishes, and her castration is alienating in that, from that moment forward, she must

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<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Barnett’s *The Ignoble Savage*, Ross discusses the conventions of frontier romance, one of which involves a man rescuing a woman; see p. 322.

forsake her romantic desire for political duty. Although she loses an arm and not the phallus, the dismemberment of Magawisca's arm nevertheless effects a transformation of her gender identity, as Fetterley observes, "she has acquired substantial political power in the world of the fathers, effectively displacing [Oneco] in her father's affection and, more significantly, in his council ... In a word, she is the daughter understood as son" (90).<sup>30</sup> Suzanne Gossett and Barbara Bardes offer another helpful reading of the wounding of Magawisca's body in regard to gender roles:

the mutilation is symbolic of her destruction as a complete female person. She has broken out of the restraints of womanhood by heroic action and by being more, has become less. She will never marry. At the same time, the action symbolizes her altruistic female nature and ties her to her benefactress, Mrs. Fletcher, the bird whose wing was broken while stretched over her children. (21)

Gossett and Bardes make a number of important points about Magawisca's heroism; first of all, the native woman pays a heavy price for this act of altruism. At a later point, the narrator reports on native attitudes toward disfigurement: "Magawisca might have at once identified herself, by opening her blanket, and disclosing her person; but that she did not, no one will wonder who knows that a savage feels more even than ordinary sensibility at personal deformity" (191). The narrator's use of "savage" speaks to the level of acceptable racism prevalent at the time (191), but the comment also gives a clue as to how much Magawisca sacrificed for Everell. Since Magawisca will remain single as a result of this incident, Sedgwick once again subtly advances her portrayal of the Indians as a dying race because Magawisca will not be producing

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<sup>30</sup> Karcher similarly comments on the "phallic overtones" of this dismemberment (xxv), and she makes arguments similar to Gossett and Bardes's about Magawisca's defeminization and to Fetterley's analysis of her subsequent role as "son" to Mononotto (Karcher "Introduction" to *Hope Leslie* xxiv-xxv; Fetterley 90).

any progeny to replace even a small number of those who were massacred at Mystic. Thus, the dismemberment has additional sexual connotations in the fact that the castrating gesture effectually renders her infertile.

While Kelley's assessment of Magawisca's intervention as "the most heroic act in the entire novel" rightly points to the bravery and courage of her act (xxvii), the far-reaching implications of the self-sacrificing dimension of her invention demand further interrogation. In her analysis of nineteenth-century images of white and native women, Faery discusses the historical and cultural significance of Magawisca's extended arm: "The extended arm of the Native woman, however, defends and protects not her own life, but that of the white colonists ... It is a gesture of willing self-sacrifice, as in so many of the pictorial representations of Pocahontas's rescue of Smith and in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novel *Hope Leslie* ..." (178).<sup>31</sup>

Previously, we have seen that Magawisca places her body in front of Mrs. Fletcher's in an effort to save her life during her father's raid, and Magawisca's comparable but more consequential effort to defend Everell communicates a similar message of implicit validation of Anglo-American culture because she so willingly sacrifices herself for its sake. It is not only that Magawisca is willing to give her life for one of the white characters, but also that her individual sacrifice masks a hidden agenda of insisting on the superiority of Anglo-American culture to that of American Indian culture.

The relationship between Magawisca and Mononotto closely resembles that of Françoise and Talasco, characters in Sedgwick's short story, "The Catholic Iroquois," which was originally published in the *Atlantic Souvenir* in 1826, a year before *Hope Leslie* was published. "The Catholic Iroquois" recounts the story of a seventeenth-

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<sup>31</sup> For a further discussion of Pocahontas in relation to *Hope Leslie*, see Karcher's "Introduction" to *Hope Leslie* p. xxiv, Faery pp. 178, 188-196, and Tilton p. 78.

century French missionary, Père Mesnard, who proselytizes among the Ottawa near the regions of Niagara and Montreal. An Ottawa chief presents Père Mesnard with two Iroquois Indian girls whom he has captured, explaining to the priest that ““they are the daughters of my enemy—of Talasco, the mightiest chief of the Iroquois—the eagle of his tribe—he hates Christians—make his children Christians, and I shall be revenged”” (54). The two girls are baptized with the names Rosalie and Françoise, and Rosalie fervidly embraces Catholicism and eventually becomes a nun. Françoise, however, falls in love with a French officer, Eugene Brunon, who is Père Mesnard’s nephew, and they have a short-lived but happy marriage. Genanhatenna, Françoise’s mother, pleads with her to return to help ensure that their family line will continue: ““if you return not, [Talasco] perishes without a single scion from his stock”” (56). Her mother’s plea reinforces the representation of Indians as a vanishing race, but despite her affection for her mother and her people, Françoise refuses to renounce her Catholic faith, as her father insists.

Accompanied by French soldiers, Eugene rescues Françoise after Talasco forcibly recaptures her, and Genanhatenna utters an ominous pronouncement to Françoise shortly before she flees with Talasco in the face of the threat posed by the French: ““Yes, one word—*Vengeance*. The day of your father’s vengeance will come—I have heard the promise in the murmuring stream and in the rushing wind—it will come”” (57). As has been previously discussed, Magawisca likewise forewarns Everell of her father’s likely plans for revenge: ““Then listen to me; and when the hour of vengeance comes, if it should come, remember it was provoked”” (48). The Iroquois stage an attack on the Ottawa, overwhelming them and killing Eugene in the attack. Françoise faints after seeing her husband killed and then beheaded by her father, and she is carried back to an Iroquois village. Talasco wants Françoise to renounce Catholicism and to marry Allewemi, an Iroquois chief, but she prefers to die

the death of a martyr. The dynamics of the father's law and the daughter's transgression occur in both this story and *Hope Leslie*, and in both texts the daughter's body suffers great violence at the hands of her father. Françoise refers to herself as "a Christian martyr" (65), and she dies a melodramatic and lurid death upon the pile:

[Talasco] leaped upon the pile, and tearing the crucifix from her hands, he drew his knife from his girdle, and made an incision on her breast in the form of a cross—"Behold!" he said, "the sign, thou lovest—the sign of thy league with thy father's enemies—the sign that made thee deaf to the voice of thy kindred."

"Thank thee, my father!" replied Françoise, with a triumphant smile; "I might have lost the cross thou hast taken from me, but this which thou hast given me, I shall bear even after death."

The pile was fired—the flames curled upwards; and the Iroquois martyr perished. (66)

Although the parallels between Françoise and Magawisca are not exact, they are nonetheless significant; each character defies her father's wishes on behalf of a character or a principle associated with Anglo-American culture. The emphasis on fathers and daughters in Sedgwick's fiction emphasizes the entanglement of political, religious, and romantic factors, and both Françoise and Magawisca partly make their sacrifices, which have both personal and political implications, because of a love affair with a white character. As we shall see, Sedgwick is much more willing to inflict grievous penalties on native characters than on white characters for their respective acts which contest patriarchal authority.

Magawisca offers her life on behalf Mrs. Fletcher at the Bethel homestead and on behalf of Everell at the sacrifice rock, and she undertakes great risks to arrange for a meeting between Hope and her long-lost sister, Faith. Just as the Pequot's initial



hospitality toward the English settlers is not reciprocated, Magawisca gives up far more than she receives in return for her sacrifices for all three of the above mentioned characters. As a sign of gratitude for Hope's rescue of Nelema from an unjust prison sentence, Magawisca agrees to arrange a meeting between Hope and Faith, whom Hope has not seen since Faith's capture during the Bethel raid. Faith has adapted to the culture of her captors, and she has married Oneco. At the secret reunion of the sisters, Hope's first reaction to Faith's appearance is one of recoil: "At this first assurance, that she really beheld this loved, lost sister, Hope uttered a scream of joy; but when, at a second glance, she saw her in her savage attire, fondly leaning on Oneco's shoulder, her heart died within her; a sickening feeling came over her ..."

(237). It is not simply the fact that Faith looks different in her Indian clothing but that she embraces Indian culture, which affects Hope so strongly. Moreover, Faith's affection for Oneco is illustrated in their physical touch, "fondly leaning on Oneco's shoulder" (237). Hope is overcome by a sense of distance from her sister, and she places more emphasis on culture than nature, as the narrator's comment reveals, "Hope knew not how to address one so near to her by nature, so far removed by habit and education" (239). After Mononotto liberates his children from their captivity at Bethel, he commands Oneco to change out of "his English dress" (67): "'Thou shalt return to our forests,' he continued, wrapping a skin around him, 'with the badge of thy people'" (67). In regard to the obsession with clothing and identity in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Samuels observes that the significance accorded to dress implies that one can change one's identity through cultural and linguistic signs: "the disguises and substitutions of the novel indicate a rather more fundamental uneasiness about the constructedness of identity, or about whether the body is more than a theater for the performance of identity" (104). The same could also be said of *Hope Leslie* because

much attention is paid to dress and its role in signaling the instability of cultural and racial affiliations.

In contrast to Rowlandson, Faith offers an example of a white captive who “goes native,” and although the personal relations between Faith and Oneco are based on mutual affection and devotion to each other, Sedgwick’s portrayal of them discloses considerable reservations about their union, revealing her unease about the captive woman who is seduced. Magawisca warns Hope that Faith no longer speaks English; commenting on Faith’s nature, Magawisca says ““some, you know, are like water, that retains no mark; and others like the flinty rock, that never loses a mark”” (200). Faith is obviously of the former disposition, and she is further characterized by “vacancy,” suggesting that she lacks willpower and the strength to act on her own. During her reunion with her sister, the narrator describes the appearance of Faith’s face as “pale and spiritless, [and] only redeemed from absolute vacancy by an expression of gentleness and modesty” (240).<sup>32</sup> Previously, Hope “[shudders] as if a knife had been plunged in her bosom” when she learns of her sister’s marriage (196), and now she experiences a similar physical sensation of pain and revulsion when she sees her sister. Hope is one of the more enlightened characters in the novel, and it is easy to imagine how much more scandalized the rest of the white community would be at the sight of this interracial couple.

In the discussion of Rowlandson’s relations with her Indian captors, we saw that the subject of the seducibility of the white woman was a major concern of the Puritan community, and the same fears about the crossing of boundaries are evident in Sedgwick’s representation of Faith and Oneco’s marriage. Faith has also converted to

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<sup>32</sup> For an interesting discussion of Hope’s reaction to her sister’s appearance, see Fetterley p. 89. Faery also offers a useful critique of the politics of interracial marriage in *Hope Leslie*, see pp. 188-189. Karcher asserts that Sedgwick’s portrayal of Faith and Oneco’s relationship strongly argues against interracial marriage; see pp. xxii-xxiii.

Catholicism, tapping into another deep-seated prejudice of the Puritan community. In regard to her son, Rowlandson writes that “it might have been worse with him, had he been sold to the *French*, than it proved to be in his remaining with the *Indians*” (89). Rowlandson fears the French Catholics more than the heathen Indians because, like most Puritans, she worries about the seductive powers of the French to convert people to what they considered decadent and devilish practices of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup> Faith has been doubly seduced by both Indian culture and by the Catholic religion, but her vulnerability to seduction is depicted as arising from her easily influenced character.

In reference to Faith and Oneco’s marriage, Castiglia dubs it the “the only happy interracial marriage in nineteenth-century American literature” (“In Praise” 10). A number of other nineteenth-century writers also depicted interracial romances or marriages, but the couple was usually separated in some way, ultimately revealing white society’s rejection of such unions. Faery reports that “[f]ive books appeared in the 1820s that addressed in varying ways the issue of intermarriage . . . These texts provided sites for the highly charged erotic encounters of white women and Indian men” (179). For example, in Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok* (1824), which is set in the 1630s in New England, Mary Conant, daughter of a stern Puritan father, defies the authorities and conventions of the Puritans by marrying an Indian. Prior to her marriage to Hobomok, Mary’s father refuses to allow Mary to marry Charles Brown because he is an Anglican, a theme which Sedgwick employs in William and Alice’s star-crossed romance. After hearing of Brown’s supposed drowning on a shipwreck, Mary tells Hobomok, the noble Indian, that she will marry him: “I will be your wife, Hobomok, if you love me” (121). Driven by despair, Mary turns to Hobomok

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<sup>33</sup> I am drawing on Toulouse’s discussion of Puritan attitudes toward Roman Catholicism; see pp. 141-43.

because he is the only one left to love her. Child does not fully sanction Mary's decision to marry because Mary is described as suffering from "a partial derangement of [her] faculties" when she makes this choice (120). However, as time passes, Hobomok's unwavering devotion and his strength of character wins over Mary: "So much love could not but awaken gratitude; and Mary by degrees gave way to its influence, until she welcomed his return with something like affection" (135). The bonds between Faith and Oneco are much stronger than those between Mary and Hobomok, and this may have something to do with the fact that Faith is taken captive as a young child, essentially forgetting everything about her family and their culture.

Mary still lives near her former home, and her internalization of Puritan views of Indians remains in her consciousness: "she knew that her own nation looked upon her as lost and degraded; and, what was far worse, her own heart echoed back the charge" (136). For the most part, Mary's marriage to Hobomok is happy, but the sudden reappearance of her true love, Charles Brown, prompts the end of this interracial marriage. After being released from a period of captivity overseas, Brown returns to New England, and, upon meeting Hobomok in the forest, Hobomok, in martyr-like fashion, realizes the superiority of Brown's claims to Mary:

Good and kind she has been; but the heart of Mary is not with the Indian. In her sleep she talks with the Great Spirit, and the name of the white man is on her lips. Hobomok will go far off among some of the red men in the west. They will dig him a grave, and Mary may sing the marriage song in the wigwam of the Englishman. (139)

In her sleep, Mary unconsciously reveals the truth of her heart's desire, and so Child's portrayal of Hobomok's decision to end their marriage in order that Mary and Charles

can marry is conveniently sanctioned by the dictates of true love.<sup>34</sup> Faith and Oneco are not separated, at least not permanently separated as are Mary and Hobomok, but, even so, Castiglia's characterization of their marriage as "the only happy interracial marriage in nineteenth-century American literature" requires further clarification ("In Praise" 10). While it may be a "happy" marriage, it is not represented as entirely positive, as we have seen.

Various critics have identified the historical figure, Eunice Williams, as a source for Faith Leslie.<sup>35</sup> Eunice Williams was a distant relative of Sedgwick's who was taken during a raid on her home in Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1704, and she subsequently married a Caughnawaga Indian, converted to Catholicism, and refused to return to white society despite the pleas of friends and family (Kolodny 69, Namias 91). Originally taken as a captive in 1758 from her frontier home in Pennsylvania, Mary Jemison, like Eunice, ultimately chose to stay with her captors, the Seneca Indians, and her narrative also offers a positive model of acculturation, which shows the permeability of cultural boundaries, at least in the direction of a Euroamerican woman moving into American Indian culture. Having been taken at about age fifteen, Jemison retained her knowledge of English, and in 1824 her narrative was published after James Seaver transcribed and edited it (Namias 189). As June Namias reports, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, was an international bestseller that went through numerous editions and printings: "Within the next 105 years it went through twenty-seven printings and twenty-three editions ranging from 32 to 483 pages. ... a remote frontier event became a nationally, indeed internationally, known story" (152). The bestseller status of white women's captivity narratives was most likely related to

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<sup>34</sup> For a further discussion of the interracial marriage in *Hobomok*, see Faery pp. 185-186, and Karcher's "Introduction" to *Hobomok* a good overview of sexual and racial politics in this novel.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see Karcher pp. xii, xviii, xxiii ("Introduction" to *Hope Leslie*); Person pp. 679; Kolodny pp. 69-70; and Faery p. 184.

the dominant culture's unease with the apparent fluidity of cultural and racial boundaries set forth in such narratives.

Certain passages in Jemison's narrative would have been quite subversive; for example, Jemison openly speaks of her love for her first husband, Sheninjee, whom she describes as "a noble man; large in stature; elegant in his appearance; generous in his conduct; courageous in war; a friend to peace, and a great lover of justice" (147). From his attractive physical appearance to his fine character, Sheninjee is presented as possessing desirable characteristics frequently sought after in a husband. Similar to the fictional Mary Conant, Jemison admits that she initially felt some reluctance to be involved in an interracial relationship, but those feelings prove to be temporary:<sup>36</sup>

The idea of spending my days with him, at first seemed perfectly irreconcilable to my feelings: but his good nature, generosity, tenderness, and friendship towards me, soon gained my affection; and, strange as it may seem, I loved him! – To me he was ever kind in sickness, and always treated me with gentleness; in fact, he was an agreeable husband, and a comfortable companion. (147)

Jemison's culturally ingrained prejudice is quickly overcome by her positive interactions with her husband. Commenting on the cultural significance of race and national identity, Faery makes the following argument: "The gender reversal [of white man and native woman] makes the racial mixing more ideologically charged; the white woman, icon of the racial purity of the nation, had to remain closed to penetration by 'dark savages' if the white identity of the country was to be preserved" (179).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Kolodny for an interesting comparative discussion of *Hobomok* and Jemison's narrative, pp. 70-71.

<sup>37</sup> In her discussion of violent acts against women and children in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Samuels also analyzes the role of reproduction and the status of the female body in respect to questions of national identity; see pp. 105-112. Moreover, Kolodny points out that there was greater acceptance of

Annette Kolodny discusses another violation of gender norms evident in Jemison's narrative:

A comfortable and secure life 'in my own house, and on my own land' (*MJ*, p. 143), bespoke the reward for surmounting wilderness hardships that had previously been accorded to men—but never to a woman—in American literary history. As such, Jemison's *Life* was 'revolutionary' not for the generic alterations [Richard] Slotkin cites, but because it represented the first text in American literature to move a real-world white woman beyond the traditional captivity pattern to something approaching the *willing* wilderness accommodations of a Daniel Boone" (80).

Jemison enjoys the rights of property ownership, and she adapts to life in the wilderness, a space that was typically reserved for men.<sup>38</sup> Jemison's and Williams's, as well as their fictional counterparts', preferences for their respective Indian husbands is also at odds with stereotypical constructions of feminine sexuality as passive or non-existent since these women endured the scorn of their birth cultures to remain with these men. As the real-life events of Mary Jemison and Eunice Williams testify, there could be a positive outcome to seduction of a white woman by Indian captors; white women could live fulfilling and independent lives in various Indian communities. In spite of these real-life examples, Sedgwick's fictional portrayal of Faith and Oneco's marriage is less daring.

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interracial unions involving white men and Indian women: "few English colonials were as yet prepared to accept the fact of apparently willing miscegenation, especially where the white partner was a woman. (That male hunters and traders often took Indian 'squaw wives,' as they were scornfully termed, was common knowledge; but most whites preferred to see these as temporary unions of convenience, or else wrote off the white hunter as hopelessly 'Indianized')" (70).

<sup>38</sup> See Kolodny pp. 70-71 for a further discussion of the place of men and women in the frontier wilderness.

Jemison and Williams both had children with their Indian husbands, but Sedgwick shies away from addressing this issue in *Hope Leslie* by portraying Faith and Oneco as childless.<sup>39</sup> One of the reasons Jemison cites for remaining with the Seneca is that she feared how white society would treat her children: “I had got a large family of Indian children, that I must take with me; and that if I should be so fortunate as to find my relatives, they would despise them, if not myself; and treat us as enemies; or, at least with a degree of cold indifference, which I thought I could not endure” (178). Jemison is fully aware of the racism she and her children would face if they were to attempt to integrate into white society, and her knowledge of the strict policing of this boundary is one factor in her decision to remain with the Seneca. In *Hobomok*, Mary and Hobomok have a son, and Mary explains the child’s name to the long-lost Charles: “‘According to the Indian custom, he took the name of his mother,’ answered Mary, ‘I call him Charles Hobomok Conant’” (149). By legally carrying his mother’s name and by sharing his first name with his mother’s first love, the child is associated with this couple. The child is originally called Hobomok, after his Indian father, but the narrator comments that “by degrees his Indian appellation was silently omitted” (150). Physically, the child retains marks of his Indian heritage with his “glossy black hair” (148), “swarthy” complexion (149), and “roguish black eye” (149), but culturally, he grows into a white man who attends Harvard and then “finish[es] his studies in England” (150). Commenting on Child’s version of assimilation, Carolyn Karcher equates it to “cultural genocide” in her “Introduction” to *Hobomok* (xxxii). Faery asserts that “racial absorption of Indians by whites” was more evident in eighteenth-century texts, but that the opponents of interracial marriage had gained ascendancy in the nineteenth century (179). This is borne out in Magawisca’s bitter sarcasm when she responds to Hope’s despair at the news of her

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<sup>39</sup> See Karcher’s “Introduction” to *Hope Leslie* p. xxiii for a discussion of their childlessness.



sister's marriage to an Indian: "Think ye that your blood will be corrupted by mingling with this stream?" (197).

The meeting of the long-separated sisters is short-lived because Sir Philip Gardiner, Hope's duplicitous and fawning suitor, alerts the Puritan authorities about the meeting because he wants to ingratiate himself with the colony's elite. When the Puritan authorities disrupt the clandestine meeting of the sisters, Faith is temporarily separated from Oneco. Moreover, Magawisca is recaptured, and she is eventually put on trial for allegedly organizing a pan-Indian confederation whose purpose is to revolt against the English settlers. At her trial, Magawisca proudly wears her native clothing:

Her national pride was manifest in the care with which, after rejecting with disdain the Governor's offer of an English dress, she had attired herself in the peculiar costume of her people. Her collar—bracelet—girdle—embroidered moccasins, and purple mantle with its rich border of bead-work, had been laid aside in prison, but were now all resumed and displayed with a feeling resembling Nelson's, when he emblazoned himself with stars and orders to appear before his enemies, on the fatal day of his last battle. (297-298)

Like Nelson, Magawisca has lost an arm, and the allusion to his "fatal day of his last battle" conveys the heroic but doomed destiny of both leaders. Sedgwick provides considerable detail about Magawisca's dress in this scene, and her dress signifies her pride as well as her defiance when she appears before the Puritan magistrates.<sup>40</sup> Sedgwick also raises Magawisca's trial to the level of national epic by comparing her to Nelson, and she also symbolically associates Magawisca with Anne Hutchinson, the

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<sup>40</sup> Zagarell offers a further discussion of the significance of Magawisca's dress on this occasion; see p. 55.

outspoken and outcast Puritan woman who challenged the authority of Puritan ministers:

[Hutchinson's] significance is further underscored by the prominence in *Hope Leslie* of Governor Winthrop, historically the architect of her persecution, and by the fact that the trial of Magawisca corresponds with the date of Anne Hutchinson's death. Since the supporters of Hutchinson refused to take part in the expedition against the Pequods, we might be justified in reading the trial of Magawisca as coded representation of the trial of Anne Hutchinson. (Fetterley 96-97)

Fetterley also notes that Anne Hutchinson is mentioned during the same conversation in which William Fletcher tells his wife about the arrival of Hope and Faith, and she remarks that such an allusion "hardly seems accidental" (96). At her trial, Magawisca refuses to submit to Puritan authorities, informing them that "I deny your right to judge me. My people have never passed under your yoke—not one of my race has ever acknowledged your authority" (302). Magawisca's eloquent defiance, though admired by some, is not permissible or tolerable within the Puritan community, and, like Hutchinson, she becomes an outcast.

Governor Winthrop notices a similar trait of outspokenness and rebellion in Hope: "I know thou art ever somewhat forward to speak the dictates of thy heart" (288). As previously discussed in chapter one, Lonna Malmshemer notes that Puritan women's public functions were extremely curtailed by a rigid gender hierarchy. Therefore, we see that Hope and Magawisca are very radical in their transgression of social, religious, and political codes that excluded women from engaging in public affairs.<sup>41</sup> However, Hope's violations of these codes are tolerated and sometimes even

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<sup>41</sup> Kelley also offers a helpful discussion of the subordination of women within Puritanical culture; see pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

smiled upon by the Puritans, but Magawisca's conduct, though equally valiant, is in no way excused.

In a comparison of Hope and Magawisca's acts of disobedience what is most notable is that Hope and Magawisca face very different consequences and receive vastly disparate penalties for their defiance of established authority, and this is true not only on the individual level but also on the broader level of the respective communities that they represent. Magawisca's interactions with Puritan characters lead to her imprisonment and finally to her exile from her homeland. Even though Hope similarly opposes authority figures, the negative consequences of her rebellion are in no way equivalent to those that Magawisca must endure. At most, Hope receives a proverbial slap on the wrist for her participation in illegal acts, and as mentioned above, even the Puritan patriarchs often covertly admire her transgressions. Whereas Magawisca exercises agency by performing courageous physical deeds, ones which are culturally coded as masculine, Hope, to a certain extent, trades on her feminine charms, as Magawisca remarks to Hope, "that no one can look on you and deny you aught; that you can make old men's hearts soft, and mould them at your will ...'" (199). In order to perform the culturally-coded masculine deeds, Magawisca sacrifices a portion of her femininity when she loses her arm, and she essentially assumes the role of son to her father, counseling him in matters of state and political and military decisions, as Fetterley puts it "she is the daughter understood as son" (90).

Hope's power partly rests on her ability to seduce with her attractive appearance, and in the case of William Fletcher, her adoptive father, it is Hope's resemblance to her mother that draws her to him through an emotion markedly different than parental love. Hope is described as "the child of [Fletcher's] affections, whom he loved with even more than the tenderness of a parent" (262), and his feelings

toward Hope interfere with his ability to instruct her in the mode of feminine submission to male authority. Previously, William describes his passionate love for Hope's mother, Alice, and his love for Alice is, in part, transferred to Hope: "[he] infused into the parental affection he felt for the daughter, something of the romantic tenderness of the lover of her mother" (127). There is a certain eroticization of the paternal relationship in William's affection for Hope, which compromises his role as disciplinarian, but his love for her is also what creates the opportunity for her to exercise a limited form of agency.

Hope acts on her own conscience not on the strict letter of the law as promulgated by male religious and political authorities, but ultimately and luckily for her, her personal desire coincides with the political goals of the colony.<sup>42</sup> In accordance with her sense of justice, Hope masterminds a plan to release Magawisca from her captivity in the Boston prison. Hope first convinces the warden, Barnaby, to let her visit Magawisca without the required pass from the Governor, which she accomplishes through playing to his affections for her: "'Well, well,' he said, after hesitating and jingling his keys for a moment, 'dry up your tears, my young lady; a 'wayward child,' they say, 'will have its way;' and they say too, 'men's hearts melt in women's tears,' and I believe it; come, come along, you shall have your way'" (325). Hope's feigning of the appearance of weakness, as manifested in her tears, becomes an element of strength, a classic strategy of seduction. In a scene that illustrates the instability of both gender and racial identities, Hope effects a substitution of Master Craddock for Magawisca by having her don his "wig, hat, boots, and cloak" (327), and this masquerade, along with some further cajoling on Hope's part, is successful in

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<sup>42</sup> As Kelley notes, Magawisca and Hope, although they profess different religions, operate on the same basic ethical principle: "Rooted in identical spiritual ground, Hope and Magawisca find personal integrity and ethical behavior not in the dictates of external authority, but in the impulses of the heart" (xxii).

getting Magawisca out of jail and in enabling her to rejoin Mononotto, Oneco, and Faith.<sup>43</sup>

As Kelley points out, Hope transgresses laws only on behalf of others (xxiii), and so her insubordination and her transgression conform to what Zagarell terms “a conservative ethos of feminine self-sacrifice . . .” (56). Zagarell proceeds to argue that “in *Hope Leslie*, women’s acts in support of liberty, though never committed for the gain of the perpetrator, are assertively political: they undermine the Puritans’ patriarchal authority” (56). Certainly, it is true that Hope generously and courageously acts on behalf of others, and her actions do contradict the dictates of her Puritan elders on a surface level but on a deeper level Hope’s desires and the political goals of the Puritan rulers overlap. Barnes argues that “seduction fiction puts sociopolitical anxieties concerning the nature of authority into a personal context, where private interpersonal relations intersect with public concerns” (9). Sedgwick’s novel frequently brings together public and private concerns, and she employs the conventions of seduction fiction to offer a limited critique of blind obedience to patriarchal authority, although her criticism of this authority in relation to gender is more progressive than it is in relation to race.

Even though the jailbreak is a grave crime, Hope faces no serious repercussions for her involvement in this action; in fact, her freeing of Magawisca turns out to benefit the whole Puritan community. Intertribal warfare breaks out shortly after Magawisca’s release, and Governor Winthrop wants to avoid giving the Indians a common cause to rally around, which would be the likely outcome of any action that resulted in Magawisca’s recapture and trial by the Puritans. Inadvertently and conveniently, Hope’s illicit action proves fortuitous for the Puritans, but it is never

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<sup>43</sup> For a further discussion of the use of disguise in *Hope Leslie*, see Faery p. 187. Fetterley also offers an argument about the differences between gender and racial crossovers; see p. 95.

the case that Magawisca's generous actions on behalf of the Puritans ever benefit the Pequot in a similar fashion. Kelley argues that the "parallel between Magawisca and Hope is most striking in their challenge to established authority," and, as has been previously quoted, she goes on to assert that Magawisca's intervention in Mononotto's intended execution of Everell is "the most heroic act in the novel" (xxvii).

However, any valorization of Magawisca's heroism must also attend to the ways in which her heroism causes tremendous suffering for herself and for her nation. To be more specific, are Magawisca's heroic deeds justified by the often devastating consequences that proceed from them? I would argue that it is more accurate to call Magawisca a martyr rather than a hero; even though her martyrdom is not as explicit or as extreme as Françoise's, she does sacrifice personal fulfillment and compromise her political position to help the white characters prosper in New England. There is indeed something very troubling in the extent to which Magawisca endures bodily violence and mental and emotional suffering for the sake of various white characters.<sup>44</sup> Because Magawisca and the Pequot are in such a disempowered position, their acts of resistance to white settlers are doomed to failure, and Magawisca's defiance of authority, whether her father's authority or that of the Puritan elites, brings about severe consequences for herself and her people.

Sedgwick provides the following account of Magawisca's feelings for Everell and of the rationale guiding her choices and actions:

[Magawisca] had done and suffered much for him, and she felt that his worth must be the sole requital for her sufferings. She felt too, that she had received much from him. He had opened the book of knowledge to

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<sup>44</sup> Faery makes a similar point: "The novel repeatedly articulates a belief in Indian nobility, especially in its delineation of the character of Magawisca, but can do so because Magawisca asks little or nothing in return for the sacrifice of her arm that has liberated Everell" (187).

her—had given subjects to her contemplative mind, beyond the mere perceptions of her senses; ... but above all, he had gratified her strong national pride, by admitting the natural equality of all the children of the Great Spirit ... (276)

Magawisca endures emotional, mental, and physical pain on Everell's behalf and indirectly on behalf of the culture he represents, but her pain is not masochistic—the pain is not an avenue to pleasure. Magawisca's suffering comes closest to that of a martyr; her pain finds its justification in Everell's "worth" (276). Both Everell and Magawisca lose family members due to violence between Indians and settlers, but Everell is not required to sacrifice romantic fulfillment or to risk bodily injury on Magawisca's behalf. He is depicted as a gracious and honorable young man, but her gratitude is founded on more than his individual worth. We see the Eurocentric bias in Sedgwick's portrayal of Magawisca's sense of indebtedness; Everell bestows on her the wealth of Western culture, "the book of knowledge" (276), a heritage that apparently inspires her gratitude. Although Everell espouses an enlightened position on the differences among races, claiming that cultural factors not innate abilities produce differences in achievements and technology, his recognition brings into focus Magawisca's disempowered standpoint because the dominant power relations unequivocally privilege Western culture over Pequot culture.

By asserting that the benefits which she receives from her relationship with Everell are sufficient compensation for her sacrifices, Sedgwick implies that Magawisca accepts the superiority of Anglo-American culture, but other examples suggest that Magawisca does not concede this point. What white culture finds most daring and threatening about Magawisca is that she publicly denies the superiority of Anglo-American culture. To name two examples: Magawisca firmly maintains her belief in native religion despite repeated attempts by Anglo-American characters to

convert her to the Christian God, and she refuses to accept Anglo-American dress, preferring to wear her native clothing at her trial even though it alienates the Puritan audience. After escaping from jail and being reunited with her remaining family members, Magawisca is left with no choice but to leave her former home, as the narrator recounts, “Before the dawn of the next morning, this little remnant of the Pequod race, a name at which, but a few years before, . . . all, English and Indians, ‘grew pale,’ began their pilgrimage to the far western forests. That which remains of their story, is lost in the deep, voiceless obscurity of those unknown regions” (359). For a novel that has paid so much attention to history, the consignment of the Pequot to “the deep, voiceless obscurity of those unknown regions” is hardly a desirable fate; additionally, the description of “this little remnant of the Pequod tribe” evokes the rhetoric of the Indians as a dying race. Sedgwick ultimately resolves the question of whether or not Magawisca concedes to the superiority of Anglo-American culture by presenting Magawisca as sadly yet fixedly leaving her former homeland.

Despite the fact that she is a fugitive, Hope and Everell are portrayed as desperately trying to convince Magawisca to remain with them, and it is Magawisca who enunciates the harsh reality of her situation: “we must part—and part for ever” (350). The painful parting of these characters reverses the historical reality of Indian removal because Magawisca is the one who is presented as enforcing a self-imposed banishment while the benevolent white characters urge her to stay. Faery perceptively discusses how scenes of “the ‘cooperative’ willing disappearance of Indians” in novels such as Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok* and *Hope Leslie* affects white audiences (186): “Indian characters who voluntarily removed themselves embodied the deep-seated desires of white Americans for Indians to disappear without whites’ having to resort to violence” (191). While offering no recognition of their complicity in political structures that facilitate the disappearance of Indians, Hope and Everell appear heroic



in their efforts to convince Magawisca to remain with them. This is indeed a seductive narrative strategy, one which subtly advances a political goal; the line between coercion and consent is blurred, obfuscating the true reason behind Magawisca's departure.

As she is saying her farewells to Hope and Everell, Magawisca sanctions their long-awaited marriage with the following blessing: "Her voice faltered for the first time, and, turning from her own fate to what appeared to her the bright destiny of her companions, 'my spirit will joy in the thought,' she said, 'that you are dwelling in love and happiness together'" (350). The contrast between "her own fate" and "the bright destiny of her companions" is stark (350), and, as her faltering voice suggests, it must be extremely painful for Magawisca to give her blessings to this couple because of her own former romantic attraction to Everell. Digby, the Fletcher's servant, raises the issue of their youthful attraction in his reflections to Everell: "'time was, when I viewed you as good as mated with Magawisca ...'" (223-224). But, he goes on to approve the rightness of Hope and Everell's relationship: "'for I believe it would have broken Magawisca's heart, to have been put in that kind of eclipse by Miss Leslie's coming between you and her. Now all is as it should be; as your mother—blessed be her memory—would have wished, and your father, and all the world'" (224). Everell's response confirms the former possibility of a romance with Magawisca: "'Yes, Digby, I might have loved her—might have forgotten that nature had put barriers between us'" (224). The reference to "nature" is a convenient excuse for the impossibility of their relationship, and with Digby's pronouncement that "all the world" rejoices in their union, Sedgwick goes to great lengths to naturalize the union of Hope and Everell.

In her analysis of early American novels, Samuels offers a key insight about the marriage plot in many of these texts: "Put simply, the marriages of the characters

in these novels typically depend on their political commitments and produce a founding of the family that founds the state” (17). Of course, Faith and Oneco also marry, but they are clearly not a suitable couple for producing future citizens of the nation. Although the marriage plot is subordinate to the plots of captivity, imprisonment, and escape, the union of Hope and Everell, both of whom are white, wealthy, and tolerant Christians, is crucial to Sedgwick’s agenda of envisioning New England as a land of new possibilities and freedom for a certain kind of Anglo-American.<sup>45</sup>

While Magawisca and Hope share much in common, especially in their commitment to obeying the truth of their own hearts, in some ways, Magawisca may be more like Esther Downing, the meek and subservient young woman who is often praised as a model of Puritan womanhood. In a gesture similar to Magawisca’s renunciation of love and to her self-imposed banishment, Esther gives up her claim to Everell to whom she becomes engaged through one of Hope’s impetuous impulses. In a letter explaining her decision, Esther writes, “And to thee, my loving—my own sweet and precious Hope Leslie—I resign him. And may He, who, by his signal providence, hath so wonderfully restored in you the sundered affections of your parents ... —may He make you his own dear and faithful children in the Lord” (367). After renouncing her claim to Everell, Esther returns to England for a number of years before coming back to New England. With “her disinterested devotion” to all those who need her help (371), Esther is essentially depicted as a saint, and she overcomes her love for Everell through her devotion to religious duty. The Puritans praise Esther

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<sup>45</sup> Fetterley argues that “*Hope Leslie* is decidedly antiromantic” (94). Castiglia’s article also offers a persuasive reading of Sedgwick’s critique of romance; for instance, he perceptively comments on the way Sedgwick glosses over the marriage ceremony: “Defying narrative conventions, Sedgwick minimalizes the importance of the marriage: while we are told the ultimate fate of every minor character in the novel in some detail, we learn nothing about the actual wedding: all we learn is that it makes society happy” (“In Praise” 10).

for her passivity and submission, but Everell criticizes Esther for her “slavish obedience to the letter of the law” (292). While Magawisca is willing to violate her father’s law for Everell’s sake, ultimately she is able to transcend her love for Everell through her overwhelming commitment to her nation: “Her tenderness for Everell, and her grateful recollections of his lovely mother, she determined to sacrifice on the altar of national duty” (203). Both Esther and Magawisca endure the hardship of sacrificing personal desire for the sake of a higher duty in order that Hope and Everell can marry.

Sedgwick also contrasts Hope and Everell’s marriage to Sir Philip and Rosa’s scandalous relationship, and Rosa’s story is a classic version of a cautionary tale of seduction and abandonment, as critics such as Fetterley, Karcher, and Castiglia point out.<sup>46</sup> Sir Philip is an unscrupulous character on many fronts: he deceives the Puritans by masquerading as a Puritan when he is in fact a Catholic, and he betrays Hope by alerting the authorities to her secret meeting with Magawisca and Faith. Before Sir Philip even arrives in the colony, he seduces an orphaned, young girl named Rosa. Raised in a convent, Rosa is sheltered and naïve, and she believes Sir Philip’s promises of love. She later accompanies Sir Philip to New England in a not very convincing disguise as his page, Roslin. Upon first speaking with Hope, Rosa says “I have lost my way” (175), an allusion to her seduction by Sir Philip. Rosa describes her passion for Sir Philip in terms of bondage: “My heart is steeped in this guilty love. If my master but looks kindly on me, or speaks one gentle word to me, I again cling to my chains and fetters” (256). As Karcher points out, Sedgwick connects Rosa and Faith, noting that “vacancy” is descriptor applied to each character and that

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<sup>46</sup> Fetterley reads the story of Sir Philip and Rosa as a version of the *Charlotte Temple* plot of seduction and abandonment; see p. 81. Karcher also discusses *Hope Leslie* in relation to *Charlotte Temple*; see p. xi of her “Introduction” to *Hope Leslie*. Castiglia also offers a useful reading of Rosa and Sir Philip’s relationship in regard to the dangers of religion and romance for women; see pp. 9-10 of “In Praise ...”.

both characters are Catholics (“Introduction” to *Hope Leslie* xxiii). At Magawisca’s trial, Rosa/Roslin is described as “[staring] vacantly about, as if her reason were annihilated ...” (307), and toward the end of the novel, she says to Sir Philip, “Thoughts rush so fast, so wildly through my poor head—and then, again, all is vacancy” (337). For both Faith and Rosa, vacancy is used to denote a lack of mental vigor and perhaps an inability to act independently. Karcher further asserts that “despite [Faith’s] expression of ‘modesty,’ [she] is in some sense a fallen woman and that she, too, is wearing a disguise (her Indian costume) that marks her as transgressive” (“Introduction” to *Hope Leslie* xxiii). If both characters are considered as fallen women, then we can see that seduction is a sexual act, as well as a cultural act involving the crossing of racial boundaries. The example of these two characters supports Toulouse’s argument about the double connotations of seduction in Puritan New England as both a sexual act and a crossing of cultural boundaries.

Although Rosa recognizes Hope’s noble qualities, she is nevertheless exceedingly jealous of her because she knows that Hope has replaced her in Sir Philip’s affections. Sir Philip, in turn, speaks of Hope as a seductress: “the most provoking, bewitching, and soul-moving creature that ever appeared in the form of woman, is my tempter” (208). In a desperate attempt to secure Hope, who has consistently rebuffed him, Sir Philip concocts a wild plan to abduct her and bring her back to England on a ship that is sailing from Boston. In one of several cases of mistaken identity, Sir Philip’s henchmen kidnap the wrong woman. Unaware of this fact, Sir Philip whispers to the servant woman who has been kidnapped in Hope’s place: “Do not struggle thus—you have driven me to this violence—you must forgive the madness you have caused. I am your slave for life” (341). Sedgwick warns against relationships of slavish love through portrayals of dangerous relationships of seduction, those that are based on extreme forms of domination and submission, and

she most dramatically conveys this in the explosion of the ship, showing that slavish love and obedience leads to death: “The explosion was instantaneous—the hapless, pitiable girl—her guilty destroyer—his victim—the crew—the vessel, rent to fragments, were hurled into the air, and soon engulfed in the waves” (342).

Rosa throws the lamp she is carrying into an uncovered barrel of gunpowder, causing the explosion on the ship, and this is a powerful rewriting of Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1794), which tells of how Charlotte is seduced and abandoned by her deceitful lover after she sails with him to the British colonies from England. In addition to alluding to an important text in the emergent American literary tradition, the scene of lovers and ships is self-referential within Sedgwick’s own novel. Whereas the young cousins, Alice and William Fletcher, are separated on the shores of England, Hope remains safely on the shores of New England, happily betrothed to Everell. Alice is subject to her father’s authority; he physically separates her from her lover and chooses a husband for her. Hope, however, exercises a significant measure of agency in both her private and public affairs; thus, Sedgwick suggests that independence is an attractive quality and that personal autonomy is a crucial element of a successful romantic relationship, at least when personal desire and political duty coincide. Yet, the parameters of feminine agency in *Hope Leslie* are confined to the desires of the father. After all, Hope marries her stepfather’s son, keeping romantic relations squarely within the family unit. The marriage, at any rate, fulfills William Fletcher’s desire; the father still manages to exert control, just in a less overt, physical manner.

In Rowlandson’s and Sedgwick’s texts, seduction as border crossing and seduction as sexual temptation are primarily linked through the encounters of the captive woman and her captors. The captives become open to the possibility of seduction because they are displaced from their home culture, and narratives of

captivity typically involve seductive scenarios in which a woman's desire and her agency are brought into conflict with both the father's love and his law. The unresolved and candid contradictions of Rowlandson's narrative reveal the difficulties surrounding the expression of women's desire and the representation of women's agency in Puritan society, but the attempts of the ministers to direct the reception and interpretation of her text do not fully manage to stifle the glimpses of Rowlandson's rebellion within the text. While Sedgwick's novel is seemingly quite progressive about stressing the need for women's independence, there is something insidious about the collusion of the father's agenda with the desires of his daughter in *Hope Leslie*. On a political level, both texts encourage love for the other when the other resembles yourself; thus, promoting what would become in later years a racializing project of coding U.S. national identity as white. In terms of the gender implications of each text, the seductive scenarios that involve border crossings trouble the political project of constructing a white national identity, and they also challenge patriarchal law that places women in subordinate roles to men because the captives' transgressions against patriarchal law unsettle this authority, even if they do not entirely dismantle it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Designs of Her Own: A Perilous Journey from Slave Girl to Free Woman in *Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* recounts many of the major events of Harriet Jacobs's life under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, including her youthful experiences as a slave in North Carolina, her nearly seven years spent in hiding, her eventual escape around 1842, and her experiences as a fugitive slave in the North. In order to escape from her master, Dr. James Norcum (identified as Dr. Flint in her text), Jacobs spent close to seven years enclosed in a tiny garret—measuring nine feet long, seven feet wide, and at its tallest point, three feet high—located in a shed near her grandmother's house.<sup>47</sup> In 1852 Jacobs was granted legal freedom when her employer and friend, Cornelia Grinnell Willis (the second wife of Mr. Bruce in her narrative), purchased Jacobs for \$300 and subsequently freed her along with her children, who were also purchased by Willis.<sup>48</sup> Jacobs is not the only captive to have her freedom redeemed by a monetary transaction; for example, Mary Rowlandson is ransomed for twenty pounds. However, in the case of white women who were captives of Indians, their status as property was situational not categorical. In the antebellum era, the bill of sale served as the legal guarantee of freedom, but the fact of its existence is of no comfort to Jacobs. When Jacobs learns of the document securing her freedom, she experiences this knowledge as an act of violence: "A gentleman near me said, 'It's

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<sup>47</sup> Following the conventions of much of the recent criticism on Jacobs's text, I will refer to Jacobs as Jacobs rather than as Brent, the pseudonym she uses in her text. The veracity of Jacobs's narrative is well-established, and it makes the most sense to refer to her by her real name. Most scholars refer to the other people described in her text by the pseudonyms that she gives them, and to avoid any unnecessary confusion, I will refer to them by their pseudonyms as well.

<sup>48</sup> I am drawing on Yellin's *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* for this overview of the major events in Jacobs's life; see pp. 114-116 for an account of the securing of her freedom.

true; I have seen the bill of sale.’ ‘The bill of sale!’ Those words struck me like a blow” (300).

As in the earlier narratives of Indian captivity that have been discussed in chapters one and two, the tension between the male authorities in official positions of power and socially marginalized women come into conflict, often in scenes of seduction, and these confrontations demonstrate the shifting dynamics of domination and submission in which we see women abandoning roles of passive submission in the face of extreme confinement and duress. In chapter one, seduction as a mode of border crossing and as a mode of contesting patriarchal authority frequently appears in narratives of Indian captivity; in this chapter, seduction is analyzed primarily as a mode of verbal persuasion and as a mode of amorous pursuit. In Jacobs’s text, she resists her master’s stratagems to make her his mistress by foiling him with stratagems of her own, and at least in her textual representation of their relationship, it is his increasing frustration with her resistance that provides her with opportunities to loosen the bonds that tie her to him. Jacobs also uses seductive narrative strategies to persuade her reader of her virtue by artfully deploying the conventions of sentimental fiction to encourage her reader to identify with her situation while simultaneously insisting on recognition of the racist foundations which influence the construction of racial others in the antebellum era.

In *Seduction*, Jean Baudrillard theorizes on the connections among seduction, appearances, the reversibility of signs, and the position of weakness: “To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness, and this is what gives seduction its strength” (83). While they have different philosophical and political orientations, Saidiya Hartman, who analyzes “the law’s discourse of seduction” (103), and Baudrillard both emphasize that seduction is a strategy of power that operates



from a position of weakness or that derives its strength from weakness, and, as such, it presents itself as a possible mode of resistance for those who are enslaved. In his relations with Jacobs, Dr. Flint puts himself in a position of weakness through assuming the role of a spurned lover, and this is a strategy that opens up the space of seduction, as well as the problem of seduction and servitude. Hartman's astute exposition of the dangers of seduction in slave law and the limited yet important assertion of agency that Jacobs achieved through seduction examines the stakes of seduction as, to quote Hartman, "a strategic disavowal of power" (103).

Psychoanalytic theory offers a model of seduction based on theorizations about sexuality and the unconscious. According to Freud, seduction, whether it is a real event or an imagined scenario, is a sexual experience or an initiation into sexual knowledge that profoundly influences a person's psychic life and subsequent sexual relationships and erotic fantasies. Freud goes through a number of complicated stages in his thinking on seduction; in "The Aetiology of Hysteria" (1896), he proposes that "*no hysterical symptom can arise from a real experience alone, but that in every case the memory of earlier experiences awakened in association to it plays a part in causing the symptom*" (197). A hysterical symptom is one that arises from the combination of unconscious *jouissance* at play in the hysteric's unconscious and from an organic manifestation of this *jouissance* in the physical body. Freud asserts that hysterical symptoms invariably arise from a traumatic sexual encounter in the subject's childhood: "Whatever case and whatever symptom we take as our point of departure, *in the end we infallibly come to the field of sexual experience*" (199); Freud elaborates on the possible nature of the sexual experience:

In some cases, no doubt, we are concerned with experiences which must be regarded as severe traumas—an attempted rape, perhaps, which reveals to the immature girl at a blow all the brutality of sexual

desire, or the involuntary witnessing of sexual acts between parents, which at one and the same time uncovers unsuspected ugliness and wounds childish and moral sensibilities alike, and so on. (“Aetiology” 200)

Although Jacobs never reveals whether or not Flint raped her, she does depict a social and familial world in which slaves were frequently exposed to what Freud refers to above as “the brutality of sexual desire.” It is clear that Jacobs suffers physical and emotional trauma from the sexual abuse that Dr. Flint inflicts on her, and while it is not possible to diagnose her as suffering from hysterical symptoms on the basis of her text, Freud’s investigations of sexual trauma and hysteria nevertheless provide a crucial framework for understanding the implications of the positions of seducer and seduced in Jacobs’s text. Freud’s early texts on seduction offer one definition of seduction as rape or molestation, and he considers the specific case of incest between fathers and daughters. Jacobs also exposes the father, the head of what she calls the “patriarchal institution” as incestuous rapist (114), and she shows that seduction, understood as amorous pursuit, and rape are hopelessly intertwined in various sexual relationships described in her text.

In another early case history of hysteria, “Katharina” (1895), Freud meets the eighteen-year-old woman of the eponymously entitled case history, who is the daughter of an innkeeper; she seeks his help because of the hysterical symptom of “breathlessness” that is affecting her (133). During her treatment, Katharina reveals the following memory, which occurred when she was fourteen. She recalled staying at an inn with an “uncle” who comes into her room and then into her bed after a night of drinking and gambling:

She was not sound asleep when he came up, but then she fell asleep again and suddenly woke up and ‘felt his body’ in the bed. She jumped

up and reproached him. ‘What are you up to, Uncle? Why don’t you stay in your own bed?’ He tried to talk her into it, ‘Go on, you silly girl, keep quiet, you don’t know how good it is.’ – ‘I don’t much like your idea of good, not even letting a person sleep.’ She stayed by the door, ready to escape out onto the landing, until he left off and fell asleep himself. Then she got back into her bed and slept until morning. From the way in which she reported having fended him off, it would seem to follow that she did not clearly recognize the attack as sexual. (133)

Katharina’s recollection of the memory suggests that the uncle blended direct and indirect methods in an attempt to compel her submission. Pressing “his body” up against hers (Katharina later confesses that she felt his erection), the uncle forcefully attacks her while she is sleeping, but he also tries to cajole her into having sex with him with his promise of “how good it is” (133). Katharina represses the sexually threatening memory until she witnesses a sexual scene involving the same uncle and another woman, her cousin Franziska, at which point she develops her symptom of breathlessness. In a footnote added in 1924, Freud writes that “I venture now, after a great many years, to lift the veil of discretion that I observed at the time” (138), revealing that it was Katharina’s father, not her uncle, who subjected her to “the nocturnal assault,” as he puts it, and other sexually aggressive acts (134).<sup>49</sup> The euphemistic “veil of discretion” is an ambiguous image; it is unclear who is meant to

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<sup>49</sup> Various critics have rebuked Freud for his so-called abandonment of the seduction theory; Masson’s *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* is one of the most sensational examples of this. While Freud’s seduction theory moves from a general though not exclusive identification of the father as the seducer to later identifying the mother or substitutes for her (nurses, governesses) as the seducer in his essays on “Female Sexuality” (1931) and “Femininity” (1933), Freud never denied the fact of sexual abuse of children. Rather, his seduction theory develops from psychoanalyzing the effects of material experiences of sexuality in childhood to emphasizing the importance of fantasy, or psychical reality, in human subjectivity. See Cummings for a balanced treatment of the controversy over Freud’s seduction theory and for a development of his theory, especially the introduction and chapter one.

be protected by this masked identity: Katharina, her father, both of them, or perhaps even the reader.

Jacobs recounts the many “nocturnal assault[s]” that she endures in the household of Dr. Flint (“Katharina” 134), but unlike Katharina, Jacobs knows all too well the sexual nature of Flint’s designs. In the introduction to Jacobs’s text, Lydia Maria Child, an abolitionist and the editor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, addresses the difficulty of conveying the sexual material of the text in terms that resemble Freud’s note to the “Katharina” case history:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled: but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. (8)

Child introduces a theme that Jacobs takes up within her text: the connection between knowledge and sexuality, or to put it another way, the dependence of a certain kind of innocence on ignorance. Just as Jacobs is stripped of her innocence by Flint’s attempts at seduction, so too will her reader lose the comfortable but hypocritical stance of ignorance by reading her text. Drawing aside the veil, Child sets the stage for the reader’s seduction, but she still uses euphemistic terms—“delicate subject,” “peculiar phase,” and “monstrous features”—to allude to the common practices of

rape and miscegenation under slavery (8).<sup>50</sup> Child is unwilling to discuss directly the sexual abuses under slavery; in fact, it is not Child who really “present[s] these pages to the public” but Jacobs. Child pleads “for the sake of my sisters in bondage” (8); an attempt to establish a relationship between free women of the North and enslaved women of the South that is based on bonds of similarity and of love, at least of familial love. Child asks the reader to identify with Jacobs and with her cause, but as Jacobs makes her claims for subjectivity she must negotiate between the problem of being subsumed under white agency or of being reduced to an object of pity, lust, or hatred.

The assumptions about the reader that are evident in Child’s introduction are based on the nineteenth-century model of true womanhood, which stressed piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.<sup>51</sup> The entanglement of innocence and ignorance was dictated by the cult of true womanhood, but there was also a great deal of hypocrisy in this posture because most people were aware, at the very least, of miscegenation. In his research on the popularity of slave narratives, Dwight McBride also suggests that the readers’ claims of innocence may have been disingenuous, or at least exaggerated:

The sensationalism of slave narratives should not be ignored. That public demands placed on slave testimony included that they be increasingly revealing and even pruriently detailed about suffering under slavery might explain why Harriet Jacobs, for instance, had far more difficulty by 1860—some fifteen years after Douglass’s *Narrative* came out—trying to secure publication of her narrative. (154)

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<sup>50</sup> See Smith for an extended discussion of the significance of Child’s introduction and its use of euphemism in relation to the conventions and expectations of a nineteenth-century readership; pp. 37-41.

<sup>51</sup> For a fuller discussion of the cult of true womanhood, see Welter p.44.

Admittedly, the evidence that McBride offers is speculative, but other critics make similar claims about the salacious appeal of slave narratives, lending credence to McBride's argument. In his essay on masochism, "A Child is Being Beaten," Freud offers empirical evidence for the prurient qualities of texts about slavery; he reports that a significant number of his patients' beating fantasies were aroused by Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel: "In my patient's *milieu* it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the beating phantasies: those accessible to young people, such as the so-called "*Bibliothèque rose*," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, etc." (98). Citing the work of Freud, Marcia Marcus, and Richard Krafft-Ebing, Marianne Noble likewise discusses the phenomenon of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other narratives about slavery and their "function as such a notoriously successful supply of material for masochistic erotic fantasy" (127). Noble points out that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a powerful force in mobilizing abolitionist groups, but she notes that the limitation of the combination of pleasure and politics in what she calls "sentimental masochism" is that "the slaves [are] erotic objects rather than fully human subjects" (127).

Meditating on the problematic relationship of slave or former slave authors and their readers, Hartman identifies the crux of the matter:

At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the numbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates

the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays? (4)

Texts are invariably read and interpreted in a multitude of ways that cannot be predicted or controlled, and the act of sharing painful memories, or even just recalling painful memories, entails an inevitable risk for the author of slave narratives. At the end of her narrative, Jacobs writes: “It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could” (303). Like Jacobs, Hartman ponders the difficulties inherent in writing about sexual exploitation and slavery; such writing can serve as a crucial tool to advance the urgent goal of emancipation but it carries with it the possibility of erotic objectification of the slaves’ suffering. For the enslaved or the formerly enslaved, the challenge lies in agitating for political change without compromising the integrity of one’s experience; in other words, one must evoke sympathy while avoiding the collapse of difference in the moment of sympathetic identification. Jacobs withholds details about scenes of sexual abuse, decreasing the likelihood of a reader’s strictly prurient interest in her text, and her accounts of sexual abuse focus on the failure of Flint as a seducer, emphasizing his ineptitude and cruelty. Jacobs frequently addresses her readers, instructing and educating them in the way to read her text; she becomes a seducer of her reader through the rhetorical designs of her text.

Carla Kaplan asserts that “the reader [is] the constitutive feature of Jacobs’s narrative strategies” (63), and the most difficult issue that Jacobs must negotiate as she constructs her narrative for an overwhelmingly white Northern female audience is feminine sexuality, and more specifically, black feminine sexuality. The conditions of slavery, most obviously the practice of institutional rape, made it impossible for female slaves to conform to the prescriptions of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity dictated by the nineteenth-century model of true womanhood. Black

women were also subject to pernicious stereotypes about their supposedly irrepressible sexuality, as Hazel Carby explains, “Confronted by the black woman, the white man behaved in a manner that was considered to be entirely untempered by any virtuous qualities; the white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves” (27). Depicted as seductress, the slave woman shouldered the burden of guilt while the master was exonerated from his crimes. As she prepared her narrative for mass consumption, Jacobs had to struggle against her readers’ attitudes and prejudices against black feminine sexuality in particular, as well as cultural prescriptions of reticence on the subject of feminine sexuality in general. One of Jacobs most important historical scholars, Jean Fagan Yellin, remarks: “Publication of this book marked, I think, a unique moment in our literary history. *Incidents* defied the taboos prohibiting women from discussing their sexuality—much less their sexual exploitation—in print” (“Written” 209).

Karen Sánchez-Eppler interprets the conventions surrounding sexuality, knowledge, and narration to suggest “that the reader shares in this story’s sexual risk” (102), a view that is supported by Child’s description of the women who preserve their innocence by refusing sexual knowledge. Perhaps, some Northern readers could claim ignorance of the sexual abuse associated with slavery, but Jacobs goes to great lengths to show that in the South it is impossible for either master or slave to remain unaffected by the sexual practices of slavery. Jacobs recounts numerous examples of the all too common abuse of slave girls by their masters, as she says:

The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear.  
The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers.  
When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer,  
or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to



accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. (79)

The close living arrangements of various slaves and masters also resulted in the slave owner's families being corrupted by the daily spectacles of abuse:

The slaveholder's sons are, of course, vitiated, even while boys, by the unclean influences every where around them. Nor do the master's daughters always escape. Severe retributions sometimes come upon him for the wrongs he does to the daughters of the slaves. The white daughters early hear their parents quarreling about some female slave. (80)

For example, Jacobs describes the sadistic behavior of a bed-ridden young master toward his slave Luke, whom he beats mercilessly and subjects to "the strangest freaks of despotism ... [some of them] were of a nature too filthy to be repeated" (289). White women were also agents of violence, participating in brutal beatings of their slaves. Jacobs cites the following actions of Mrs. Wade, a neighboring mistress of a plantation: "At no hour of the day was there cessation of the lash on her premises. Her labors began with the dawn, and did not cease till long after nightfall. There she lashed the slaves with the might of a man" (74). In addition to brute physical violence, white women had the power to exploit slaves sexually; for example, Jacobs recounts the incident of a slave-owner's daughter who bears a child by one of her father's slaves: "She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure" (80). Thus, Southern white men and women were thoroughly steeped in the abusive practices of slavery, and any pretense to ignorance was gross hypocrisy.

Hartman aptly remarks on "the perverse domesticity of the paternal institution" (103), and this "perverse domesticity" is a frequent target of Jacobs's critique. The

triangulated relationship of the slave and “an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress,” to use Jacobs’s words (49), is at the root of the tortured relations among the members of a slave-owning family. Starting from the age of fourteen, Flint relentlessly pursued Jacobs, employing various strategies to compel her to submit, but Jacobs responded with a pugnacious attitude: “The war of my life had begun; and though one of God’s most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered. Alas, for me!” (31). Jacobs was determined to resist Flint to the utmost, but her dashing defiance was also mixed with an acknowledgment of the hopelessness of her situation. The interjection, “Alas, for me!”, sounds like a moment of retrospection, moving the narrative ahead in time. Is this sigh of sadness over her long struggle against Flint, or is it a sigh of resignation over her ultimate defeat? Jacobs leaves open these questions, and many silences surround passages about sexuality in her text.<sup>52</sup>

However, Mrs. Flint certainly recognized her husband’s lascivious interest in the young slave, and her jealousy added to Jacobs’s oppression. In a situation of structural parallelism, Mrs. Flint steps into the role that her husband occupied in relation to Jacobs: “She watched her husband with unceasing vigilance; but he was well practised in means to evade it” (49). After learning of her husband’s plans to have Jacobs sleep in his room to attend to his youngest daughter, who was also sleeping in his room, Mrs. Flint countered her husband’s sleeping arrangements for Jacobs with plans of her own, leading to another bizarre bedroom scenario in which Jacobs was instructed to sleep in a room next to Mrs. Flint’s:

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<sup>52</sup> Critics often note that there is never a full disclosure of her sexual past; there is considerable speculation but no definitive answer as to whether or not her master raped her. For instance, Hartman suspects that she is raped; see p.107. Kaplan, however, believes that she is not; see p. 56. Building on the work of Foreman, Emsley agrees with Foreman’s speculation that the verbal abuse masks physical or sexual abuse, and, while the type(s) of abuse is uncertain, it is clear that his propositions put her in jeopardy. See Foreman pp. 317-318, and Emsley 153-154.

There I was an object of her especial care, though not of her especial comfort, for she spent many a sleepless night to watch over me. Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. . . . At last, I began to be fearful for my life. It had been often threatened; and you can imagine, better than I can describe, what an unpleasant sensation it must produce to wake up in the dead of the night and find a jealous woman bending over you. (54)

The positioning of bodies in these nocturnal meetings of mistress and slave is very strange; a mixture of psychological terror and physical intimacy characterizes Jacobs's description of what she calls Mrs. Flint's "vigils" (54). Is Mrs. Flint merely reenacting her husband's tactics of seduction when she whispers into Jacobs's ear, or is there an element of her own desire in this staging of seduction? Although she has previously ordered Jacobs to swear on the Bible about the truth of her relationship with her husband, Mrs. Flint, whether she recognizes it or not, demonstrates that she believes truth can be discovered in the unconscious by her strategy of surprising the truth out of a sleeping Jacobs. Hortense Spillers suggests that these nightly encounters might manifest a sexual wish on the part of Mrs. Flint, in which she expresses her desire by stepping into the role of her husband (77). Sánchez-Eppler similarly interprets these encounters: "As she bends over her sleeping slave, her mouth at Linda's ear, Mrs. Flint occupies precisely the position of erotic dominance repeatedly denied the doctor" (96). Jacobs faltered in her ability to recount these bedroom scenes, trusting that the reader "can imagine, better than I can describe" what these incidents were like (54); such an open-ended statement lends itself to any number of possibilities.

In a critique of the frequently invoked paternalistic model of slavery in which slaveholders and their slaves are said to comprise an extended family, Sandra Gunning makes another key point about Flint's stratagem: "[Jacobs] depicts this delicacy under assault by the white master 'father' who seeks to suppress the detailed discussion of sexual – and therefore incestuous – exploitation of a surrogate daughter" (342).

Gunning's observation is made in reference to Jacobs's description of the onset of Flint's harassment; in this passage, Jacobs stresses her innocence which partly arises from her youth. At this point, Jacobs is fifteen and Flint is approximately forty years older than her: "I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature" (44-45). The "most sacred commandments of nature" sounds like an invocation of the incest prohibition, and while Flint rather ineptly assumes the role of a seducer or a spurned lover, in the initial stages of his sexual advances, Jacobs highlights their inappropriateness by showing how far he deviates from his supposed role of father.

As Jacobs withstands Flint's assaults, he becomes increasingly persistent and indefatigable in his efforts to force her into submission. Flint begins stalking Jacobs: "My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there" (46). While there is the potential for violence and violation, what we see is a prolongation of Flint's quest, a quest that resembles and mimics a courtship, albeit a perverted one. As the chase goes on, Flint seems more and more like a desperate man rather than the tyrannical master, though all of the institutional and political power remains on his side. At first, Flint tries to coerce Jacobs into submission through verbal persuasion, and even though it does not yield immediate results, he still carries on with that method, increasing its

frequency and intensity. The expression, “his footsteps dogged me” (46), evokes the metaphor of romantic pursuit as the chase, but, in the South, the chase is also the terror of the fugitive slave hunted down by ferocious packs of hound dogs. Although Jacobs is not yet a fugitive, her depiction of herself evading Flint’s authority through the figure of the fugitive slave foreshadows the more extreme forms of evasions she will later be forced to undertake.

In her reading of Jacob’s narrative, Hartman demonstrates how “the law’s discourse of seduction” was only a convenient excuse for the failure to provide official legal protections for slaves (103):

In the effort to attend to the interests of master and slave, the law elaborated a theory of power in which the affection of slave owners and the influence of the enslaved compensated for its failures and omissions. It contended that affection and influence bridged the shortcomings of law concerning the protection of black life. The ethic of perfect submission recognized the unlimited dominion of the slave owner yet bounded this dominion by invoking the centrality of affections in regulating the asymmetries of power in the master-slave relation. (90)

In Jacobs’s representations of Dr. Flint’s efforts to seduce her, she shows that he often puts himself in a position of weakness by assuming the role of a spurned lover, claiming that his affection for Jacobs restrains him from physically forcing her to comply with his sexual wishes. Although he appeals to her pity and pleads for her affection, Flint possesses concrete forms of power, and he cruelly exercises this power by imprisoning Jacobs’s relatives and by brutally striking her as well as her children, to cite a few examples. Moreover, while Flint does not technically have the legal power to kill Jacobs, there is little in actuality that would prevent him from doing so.

Jacobs exposes what Hartman calls “the law’s discourse of seduction” as a total sham (103), one that provides the slaveholders with power and privilege while leaving the slaves in a state of extreme vulnerability. Thus, there is a significant tension between the historical reality of the brutal inequality of master/slave relations and Jacobs’s frequent portrayal of Flint as a suitor for her affections.

In addition to exposing Flint’s phony posturing as a spurned lover, Jacobs deflates his lover’s discourse with her description of the “foul words” that he pours into her ear (44), and she finds the letters that he sends to her equally offensive. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that the exchange of letters appears as a staple in “the conventions of domestic fiction” (381), and the letters and the focus on the imperiled heroine shares some resemblances to Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novels, as various critics have remarked.<sup>53</sup> Valerie Smith asserts that “Jacobs could thus expect her readers to identify with her heroine” because she employs the common model of the heroine who values her chastity and who repels the advances of her seducer (37). However, Smith recognizes the limits of the comparison of Jacobs’s actual situation as a slave to that of heroines of epistolary novels, as well as to those of sentimental fiction, because Jacobs’s options were far more constrained by the institution of slavery (37). Any exercise of agency or assertion of will was often a case of choosing between the lesser of two evils.<sup>54</sup> Even though she knew that many of her readers might judge her harshly for breaching the codes of true womanhood, Jacobs painfully and reluctantly wrote of her decision to take an unmarried white lover rather than submit to Flint because this affair afforded her protection from Flint, as well as a small degree of agency in her personal life. Jacobs’s white lover, Mr. Sands seduced her

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<sup>53</sup> See also Kaplan p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Hartman’s and Sharpe’s work on the possibilities and constraints of slave women’s agency has influenced my analysis of this topic. See Hartman’s chapter on “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” especially pp. 105-112, and Sharpe’s “Introduction,” especially pp. xviii- xx.

with “his kind words” (85), and it is a “calculated” decision on her part because he can shield her, to some extent, from Flint’s advances.<sup>55</sup> And so, she hoped this act would move her away from Flint’s clutches. At the narrative level, Hartman points out that Jacobs uses her position of weakness to gain her audience’s favor by acknowledging the superiority of their moral codes while simultaneously forcing them to view the dire situation of slavery from her perspective (106-107). The reader is the one who must be convinced of the wrongs of slavery and moved to action through the narrative, but Jacobs lacks legal or social authority to influence her readers in this direction. Thus, she uses her own verbal persuasion to seduce her readers by convincing them to identify with the enslaved, and we see that seduction can play a role, even if a small one, in facilitating her goal of achieving a life of freedom.

Whereas Flint engages in seduction to compel Jacobs’s submission, she uses seduction to move her toward her goal of escaping from his tyranny. In the context of master/slave relations, seduction is a limited strategy in the quest for freedom; if slaves were to achieve a measure of protection by winning their master’s affections (as the doctrine of seduction suggests), then they could not act for themselves because they must act in accordance with what they believe to be the desire of their masters in order to retain their goodwill. Such a scope of action is obviously very restricted. Jacobs’s *Incidents* exposes the hypocrisy of “the centrality of affections” as a doctrine that protects slaves from their masters’ unlimited power (Hartman 90). Flint’s protestations of “kindness and forbearance” toward Jacobs ring false (62), and she was never deceived by them. Jacobs also exposes how short-lived such affection can be when she describes how Flint sold a slave woman who bore his child: “When the mother was delivered into the trader’s hands, she said, ‘You *promised* to treat me

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<sup>55</sup> Concerning her relationship with Sands, Jacobs writes: “I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (83).

well” (24). Even Sands, the father of Jacobs’s two children, who originally seduced Jacobs with his eloquence and solicitous attention, ultimately abandoned her and failed to fulfill his promise to free their children, as she recalls, “but the links of such relations as he had formed with me, are easily broken and cast away as rubbish. Yet how protectingly and persuasively he once talked to the poor, helpless slave girl! And how entirely I trusted him!” (215).

Jacobs describes how Flint thwarted her desire to marry a free black man, and the end of Jacobs’s dream of marriage and a conventional family irrevocably severs her plotline from those common to the sentimental and domestic novel heroines: “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” (302). Because of her captivity experience, Jacobs was forced into a position where she could critique gender roles, especially those put forth by the myth of true womanhood and that of the figure of the black seductress. Unlike the popular heroine, Charlotte Temple, of the eponymously titled novel by Susanna Rowson, Jacobs did not conform to the trajectory that condemns the seduced and abandoned heroine to death, as Charlotte Temple dies after bearing her daughter out of wedlock. Thus, Jacobs’s narrative also revises the conventions of the seduction novel, which stressed the dire consequences to young women of disobedience of parental authority. In contrast, Jacobs succeeds in securing freedom for herself and her children and in providing them with a home; furthermore, Jacobs’s daughter eased her mother’s mind by affirming her love for her mother: “‘I know all about it, mother,’ she replied; ‘I am nothing to my father, and he is nothing to me. All my love is for you’” (283).

As an unwed mother, Jacobs’s social status was marginal in comparison to the dominant white society, a point which concerns Spillers in her reflections on the importance of matriarchal organization in African-American families, as she writes:



This different cultural text actually reconfigures, in historically ordained discourse, certain *representational* potentialities for African-Americans: 1) motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied, at the *very same time* that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; 2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's *banished* name and body and the captor father's mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject" (80).

Although the specific circumstances of each female captive vary greatly, the captivity experience forces the captive to challenge norms of conduct and gender roles.

Jacobs's narrative is concerned with the traffic in women, or more to the point, the status of slave women as property, and one of her most steadfast ambitions is not to circulate as object of property in the marketplace. As Spillers argues, the captivity experience necessitates the establishment of new roles for women at the level of the family and the social sphere, ones that are not structured along the model provided by patriarchal organization.

In his relations with Jacobs, we see that Flint assumed the role of seducer, although he was neither effective nor convincing in this role, but Jacobs's representations of his use of the rhetoric of seduction create an opportunity for her to exercise a small measure of agency in the dynamics of their twisted relationship.

Whereas a slave cannot easily rebuff her master, at the level of narrative

representation, the beloved can reject her suitor. Jacobs masterfully plays with appearances, and Flint's protracted pursuit of her ultimately destroys him. Jacobs represents herself as the victim of a tortured courtship, or seduction; she represents Flint as assaulting her virtue, emphasizing her weakness and vulnerability. Even though Flint is empowered by legal and social institutions, Jacobs portrays him as undone by his desire for her. While it leaves intact the oppressive legal and social structure, the failure of Flint's seduction is nevertheless a small success for Jacobs. Instead of referring to slavery as the South's "peculiar institution," Jacobs typically speaks of it as the "patriarchal institution" (114, 222, 288); by underscoring the father's position in the institution of slavery, Jacobs exposes the father as incestuous rapist and tyrannical master. In Freud's analysis of the "Katharina" case history, the father utilizes physical aggression and verbal persuasion in his attempted rape of his daughter. At least in her textual representation of their relationship, Jacobs suggests that Flint fluctuates between the poles of coercion and consent, but his measures are far more extreme than those of Katharina's father. Jacobs reports that "a razor was often held to my throat to force me to change this line of policy [her resistance to his propositions]" (51). On other occasions, he resorts to bribes, like offering her a cottage of her own.

In her analysis of Jacobs's portrayal of Flint as seducer, Smith considers the stakes of Jacobs's allusions to the plot of Richardson's *Pamela*; she argues that "[as] is always the case when one attempts to universalize a specific political point, Jacobs here trivializes the complexity of her situation when she likens it to a familiar paradigm" (37). Smith notes that two key options are available to Pamela that are in no way available to Jacobs: Pamela can return to "the refuge of her parent's home," or she can marry a transformed and repentant Mr. B. who would "[elevate] her and their progeny to his position" (Smith 37). Certainly, Smith's points about the limitations of

the generic comparison of Jacobs's situation to that of the heroines of sentimental fiction are accurate, but surely Jacobs acknowledges these limitations at length through her exhaustive and various depictions of the abuses of slaves by their masters. Smith remarks on the mystery of Flint's apparent restraint: "Her master, for some reason reluctant to force her to submit sexually, harassed her, pleaded with her, and tried to bribe her into capitulating in the manner of an importunate suitor like Richardson's seducer" (36). Scholars venture different opinions on whether or not Jacobs was raped by Flint, but since her text gives no definitive answer on this topic, we can only speculate on the reasons why she withheld this information and the effects of this withholding. It is easy to imagine many personal reasons why she would choose not to write about being raped, if were indeed the case that she had been raped by Flint. Moreover, I would argue that one significant effect of Jacobs's portrayal of Flint's efforts to secure her consent is that she conveys the impression that Flint wants something more from her than the physical act of sex. Without her submission to his will, his dominion over her cannot be confirmed, and this suggests a psychic dimension to the struggle for domination or submission between the master and slave. If she were to mentally and spiritually submit to his desire, that act would affirm her status as an erotic object, and it would be an admission of his mastery over her, both of which she adamantly rejects.

Although we never hear Flint express feelings of affection for Jacobs, he repeatedly says that he wants to make her happy, and his hesitation over the final and irreversible act of killing her can possibly be accounted for by his feelings for her, which stay his hand. Another more plausible reason for Flint's reluctance to kill Jacobs for refusing to become his mistress is that he would rather extract the triumph of breaking her will than the empty victory of ending her life. As has been argued above, if he were to succeed in breaking her will, then he would receive confirmation

of his own power; just as the master receives recognition from the slave after he emerges victorious from their fight, according to Hegel's dialectic. It is likely that Flint's maniacal behavior arises from his failure to crush Jacobs's "determined will" (130); his status as master cannot be confirmed while his slave evades and avoids complete surrender to his will. Paul Gilroy discusses "the Hegelian impasse" that ensues between Frederick Douglass and his master when Douglass physically resists his authority; Douglass defeats his master and experiences a sense of freedom that seals his determination to escape from slavery (62-63). Jacobs and Flint are locked in their own Hegelian impasse, and her unwavering rejection of Flint's advances constitute her fight for a recognition of personhood, even if the state continued to deny her the rights of political and legal subjectivity.

Although she is discussing a different context, Joan Dayan offers commentary that sheds light on Flint's behavior: "The forbidden complicities portrayed in most gothic fiction find their source in enslavement or bondage. In a kind of covert mutuality, where masters become slaves and slaves, masters—the reversible world Hegel would later describe—the proprietor becomes possessed by his possession" (197). In Flint's case, he becomes possessed by Jacobs precisely because he cannot possess her; in fact, he cannot even lay his hands on her because he does not know where she is. After deciding to make her bid for freedom, Jacobs hides in a small room in the home of a woman who is sympathetic to Jacobs' plight even though she is also a slaveholding woman, and she observes Flint walking by as she peers out the window, remarking on the "satisfaction" that she takes in outwitting him: "Anxious as I was, I felt a gleam of satisfaction when I saw him" (154).

Later, Jacobs moves to the garret near her grandmother's house, where she spent the next seven years of her life; Hartman writes that the garret is "a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity ..." (9). The freedom is literally

and figuratively circumscribed, but Jacobs describes a number of key reversals in her relationship with Flint that result from her enclosure in secret hiding spots. While in the garret, Jacobs further vexes Flint by having a friend of hers send him letters postmarked from New York, as she explains, “I resolved to match my cunning against his cunning” (193). Flint travels to New York a number of times in pursuit of Jacobs, and it is clear that he is not trying to recover his “property” for monetary reasons, especially as he has received many offers from Jacobs’s friends to purchase her. In fact, Flint borrows \$500 in order to finance his trips to New York. From an economic standpoint, Flint’s actions make no sense, and his behavior with respect to Jacobs has been monomaniacal ever since her adolescence. At the time of his death, Flint has lost most of his wealth, and despite vigorous and sustained efforts, he failed to recapture Jacobs.

Jacobs, of course, suffers unspeakably more than Flint; she certainly endures physical violence at his hands, as well as sexual harassment. The seven years spent in the cramped and suffocating quarters of her grandmother’s shed leave her with chronic ailments, and the seven lost years with her children grieve her most of all. The specificities of Jacobs’s psychic trauma are unknowable, but the rampant sexual abuses practiced under the institution of slavery suggest that such trauma must be tremendous. Michelle Burnham reports that “Jacobs wrote her narrative secretly, at night in the attic of her employer’s house—a scenario that repeats the confining conditions of her own escape from slavery ...” (148). Burnham further observes that the chapter entitled, “The Loophole of Retreat,” is at “the exact center of the text” (148), and she astutely comments on the text’s “concern with secrecy as much as with exposure” (150). Analyzing the various definitions provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* of a loophole as “[a] narrow vertical opening, usually widening inwards, cut in a wall or other defence, to allow of the passage of missiles” (153) and “[a]n

outlet or means of escape. Often applied to an ambiguity or omission in a statute, etc., which affords opportunity for evading its intention” (154), Burnham observes that Jacobs makes the most of her imprisonment in her grandmother’s garret to turn the power of gaze and surveillance on Flint (153-154). Even though she is so close to her home, Jacobs is nevertheless in exile from her home. To say the least, the “loophole of retreat” is an ambivalent source of power and agency for Jacobs; like the mode of seduction, it brings together the opposing pairs of strength and weakness, and coercion and consent. The very fluctuation between the opposing poles of these pairs creates moments in which Jacobs can resist her master and eventually secure her freedom. Turning her gaze first on her master, Jacobs sets in motion the process that will result in her freedom; turning her narrative over to the reading public, she hopes to facilitate the movement that will lead to emancipation of all slaves.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### What Does a Woman Want?: Desire and Seduction in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Although Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the future, the setting of the novel is recognizable as Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the theocratic government that is portrayed in the novel, the Republic of Gilead, recalls many of the same prejudices seen in the society of the seventeenth-century Puritan settlers of this region. The campus of what was formerly Harvard University serves as the backdrop for much of the novel's action, and this setting evokes the Puritanical heritage of both the institution and the country because the university was named after a Puritan minister, John Harvard. Atwood dedicates the novel to Mary Webster and to Perry Miller, both of whom also share a connection to the Puritans. Mary Webster was an ancestor of Atwood's whom the Puritans condemned to death for witchcraft, and despite the fact that she was indeed hanged, Webster amazingly and strangely survived, as Atwood relates:

Luckily, they had not yet invented the drop: in those days they just sort of strung you up. When they cut Mary Webster down the next day, she was, to everyone's surprise, not dead. Because of the law of double jeopardy, under which you could not be executed twice for the same offence, Mary Webster went free. I expect that if everyone thought she had occult powers before the hanging, they were even more convinced of it afterwards. She is my favorite ancestor, more dear to my heart even than the privateers and the massacred French protestants, and if there's one thing I hope I've inherited from her, it's her neck. (qtd. in Evans 177)

Atwood explains that Webster was charged with “causing an old man to become extremely valetudinarian” (qtd. in Evans 177). Specifically, Webster was accused of practicing witchcraft on the old man, causing his illness. As a graduate student at Harvard, Atwood worked with Perry Miller, whom she describes as “the man who more or less resurrected the study of seventeenth-century Puritans in America” (Dodson 97). Webster and Miller make an unlikely pair: Webster is a representative of the disempowered and silenced female voice, and Miller is one of the academic elite who shapes the collective memory of the nation through the histories that he publishes.

Mary Webster haunts *The Handmaid's Tale* in figurative as well as in literal manifestations. Public executions by hanging are mandatory spectacles for the citizens of Gilead, and the first-person narrator, Offred, is often arrested by the sight of dangling bodies on the Wall. “The Wall,” as Offred tells us, “is hundreds of years old too; or over a hundred, at least. Like the sidewalks, it’s red brick, and must once have been plain but handsome. Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top” (31). The Wall becomes a site of terror: the modifications made to it emphasize surveillance and brutality. Moreover, the Wall is one of the many barriers that enclose and order the lives of Gileadean citizens. As Offred goes about her daily shopping errands with her partner Ofglen, they pass by the Wall and stand transfixed in front of it, as she explains: “We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them” (32). The witchcraft mania and the absolute intolerance for dissent that marked the colonial Puritan era returns with a vengeance in Gilead, and numerous men and women are unjustly persecuted – often to the point of death. People of color, religious



dissenters, homosexuals, scientists, doctors who used to perform abortions, and all others who are suspected of subversive activity are subject to imprisonment or banishment, both of which typically precede the penalty of death.

The Puritanical heritage of the country is not the only important historical reference that serves as a foundation for Atwood's text. In an interview with Danita Dodson, Margaret Atwood identifies African American slave narratives as a source for *The Handmaid's Tale* (101). In particular, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, as Written by Herself*, which was published in 1861, provides considerable insight into the dynamics of domination and submission that characterize the twisted relationship between handmaids and Commanders in Atwood's depiction of the fictional twenty-first century Republic of Gilead. Both Atwood and Jacobs are concerned with the eroticization of women's servitude and with the sexual exploitation of women under conditions of servitude, even though they are writing under very different circumstances. Jacobs is responding to the devastating material, social, and psychic conditions of black women's oppression under slavery, and she decides to write and publish her narrative to bolster support for the abolitionist cause. Atwood's novel intervenes in debates about women's liberation staged between groups ranging from religious right fundamentalists to anti-pornography feminists, and although she is clearly interested in exposing the dangers of both of these extreme positions, her novel is ultimately more focused on the significance of the psychical conditions associated with Offred's servitude.

The voice of Offred, the first-person narrator of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, reaches the reader from a space of exile. Offred addresses and implores the reader, and like Jacobs, she speaks in a confessional tone: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you

are” (268). Offred invokes the reader with an aphorism that playfully revises Descartes’ cogito and that sounds like an incantation with its repetitious formulations. While Jacobs beseeches the reader for a pressing political goal, Offred’s address to the reader is also urgent; narration is an existential act for her. After her apparent escape from Gilead, Offred’s exact location is unknown, but the tape recording of her narrative of captivity is found in Bangor, Maine. In the “Historical Notes” concluding section of Atwood’s novel, Professor Pieixoto reveals that Bangor was a stop on ““The Underground Femaleroad”” (301), and, like Jacobs, various characters in Atwood’s novel are confined in restrictive spaces as part of the Gileadean regime’s policies of control or as part of their escape routes from the regime. While the situations of women in Atwood’s and Jacobs’s texts are by no means equivalent, various structures of oppression are operating in similar ways in each of the societies depicted; women are subjected to sexual exploitation, spatial confinement, rigorous surveillance, and dehumanizing treatment as objects, or more precisely, as the property of their various masters. In addition to the Underground Femaleroad, Atwood alludes to slavery through descriptions of the prohibition on female literacy (resembling antebellum injunctions against teaching slaves to read and write), the public spectacles of torture, and the rupture of kinship bonds among handmaids and their children. On a formal level, these two works have the common feature of being written in an autobiographical and confessional mode, and issues of interpretative authority are highly contested in Jacob’s narrative and Atwood’s novel.

Jacobs critiques yet nevertheless utilizes romance conventions to reveal the limits and possibilities of seduction as “a strategic disavowal of power,” as Hartman describes it (103), and to represent the psychic battle between master and slave in which Jacobs resists her master’s desire by refusing to be an erotic object for him. More so than in the historical or fictional Indian captivity narratives, Jacobs represents

herself as deliberately manipulating her master in order to gain small freedoms for herself. *The Handmaid's Tale* can also be read as staging the problem of seduction through the depiction of the complicity of the narrator, Offred, in her servitude as a handmaid. In *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Jane Gallop writes, "as with all seductions, the question of complicity poses itself. The dichotomy active/passive is always equivocal in seduction, that is what distinguishes it from rape" (56). Jacobs is evasive on the question of whether or not Flint rapes her, but it is clear that she would in no way consent to any sexual activity with her master. Offred's acceptance of her servitude, especially her compliance with the monthly sexual ritual called the Ceremony, markedly distinguishes her situation from that of Jacobs. The mystery of Offred's acquiescence to her servitude can be explained by the seduction fantasy as theorized first by Freud and later developed by Lacan in his account of the mirror stage.

Lacan's formulation of the mirror stage offers a crucial theory for understanding seduction: the coherent image of the body reflected in the mirror is assumed by the subject as its ideal ego, which allows the subject to repress the experience of the fragmented body, *corps morcelé*, in favor of a unified body image. The ego is formed as the object of desire for the Other; in terms of the mirror stage, the mother's smile directed at the child's image in the mirror illustrates this phenomenon of ego formation as object of desire for the Other. The seduction fantasy allows the subject to repress the unsettling force of the erotic drive and to avoid experiencing desire, the state of a lack of satisfaction, of a lack of any object to satisfy the drive.<sup>56</sup> Unlike Jacobs who resists her enslavement to the utmost of her abilities,

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<sup>56</sup> I am drawing on Lacan's account of ego formation in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," and the formulation of seduction as described in McNulty's *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity*; see pp. 175, 179-180.

Offred, the first-person narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, displays a willingness to submit to her master, called the Commander. Atwood's novel can be read as staging the problem of seduction, what Gallop calls "the question of complicity" (56), through the depiction of Offred's voluntary servitude as a handmaid, a condition that allows her to avoid taking any responsibility for her own desire by simply submitting to the commands of her masters, whether they are male or female authority figures.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, describes a future society in which a right-wing, fundamentalist faction overthrows the United States government and installs a totalitarian theocracy in its place. Racial segregation, class stratification, and rigid gender roles characterize the new regime, which enforces its rule through warfare, torture, surveillance, and tightly scripted social and sexual roles for the variously classed men and women who live in the Republic of Gilead. *The Handmaid's Tale* is often discussed as a dystopian novel, and it envisions a future time that, in various ways, seems not wholly unlike the present day. The novel's epilogue, entitled "Historical Notes," goes even further into the future, to the year 2195, and the setting is an academic conference during which it is revealed that the text has been constructed from a series of tape recordings made by Offred. Long before readers reach the end of the novel, however, they are well aware of the oral quality of the text, as the narrator, Offred, early on explicitly informs the reader that she can speak of her experiences but that she cannot record them in written form: "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (39). Yet, this life of severe deprivation, which involves confinement in physical spaces, restrictive clothing resembling a nun's habit, and a lack of personal relationships and intellectual pursuits, is not necessarily unwelcome from Offred's point of view. For instance, after her friend Moira escapes from the training center for handmaids, Offred reflects on her situation and that of the other women at the center:

“Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (133). Offred’s imprisonment behind the walls of the fortress-like training center provides her with a measure of security and seemingly even comfort; aside from her obedience, little is asked of her and she asks for little in return.

As many critics of the novel observe, Offred is, for the most part, an apathetic and detached narrator. At one point, she defends her passive stance as a coping strategy: “One detaches oneself. One describes” (95). The grammatical construction of the sentence even performs this state of alienation; instead of saying “I detach myself,” Offred uses the impersonal and anonymous subject of “One.” In another sign of her detachment, Offred never directly discloses her real name to the reader, although she later shares it with her lover, Nick. Emotionally she may be numb to the world around her, but she is also firmly grounded in the material world. In spare prose, she catalogs the objects and the physical environment around her: the garden, house, and paths of the city that she travels are precisely recorded. The physical setting is largely composed of barriers and boundaries of one sort or another—whether it is the front gate of the Commander’s house or one of the many security checkpoints—the landscape and interior spaces are regulated and divided into exclusive territories that can only be accessed by certain people, depending on their gender or on their rank in the regime.

Whereas the exterior world lends itself to concrete, objective narration, Offred’s narration of her interior world of emotions, memories, and fantasies is much more variable. Although the prose style is spare, the content is very cerebral. Just as Offred enjoys playing Scrabble with the Commander, she engages in all sorts of language games, including word associations, puns, etymologies, and other varieties of word play. For example, after Moira breaks out of the center, Offred says of her, “Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose. She was now a

loose woman” (133), playing on the different meanings of the word *loose*. Words themselves, as signifiers, structure Offred’s thought patterns, and her attentiveness to language calls to mind the importance of linguistics and language to psychoanalytic theory, as Lacan asserts, “The unconscious is fundamentally structured, woven, chained, meshed, by language. And, not only does the signifier play as big a role there as the signified does, but it plays the fundamental role” (*Psychoses* 119). The sliding of signifiers within Atwood’s text, especially the word “blank,” which appears in a variety of contexts, encourages the reader to trace its reoccurrence because, as Lacan also explains “the signifier is the instrument by which the missing signified expresses itself” (*Psychoses* 221). Behind the blanks in Offred’s discourse, one may discover how she both orientates herself in relation to the experience of *jouissance* and emerges as a subject of desire.

Offred explains that she voluntarily accepts the duties of a handmaid, which revolve around the goal of bearing a child for the Commander and his wife:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (94)

Offred makes this assertion during the monthly impregnation ritual, called The Ceremony, which involves an outrageous positioning of the three bodies of the Commander, his wife, and the handmaid in a decidedly un-erotic *ménage à trois*. The participants all remain clothed, or, at least, as much as possible, and the handmaid lies on top of the wife while her husband has sex with the handmaid. The triangulation of

bodies in this scene recalls what Hartman describes as “the perverse domesticity of the paternal institution” (103).

Although she states that she accepts the duties of a handmaid, Offred struggles to find the right vocabulary to describe her submission to the Ceremony, or perhaps her complicity in it. Offred’s physical description of the fragmentation of her body, which is divided into halves, and her passivity in this scene cast some doubt on her assertion that “this is what I chose” (94). Yet, there are numerous other examples that demonstrate Offred’s acquiescence to her servitude, and we should take seriously her statement of consent to the Ceremony. Occasionally, Offred deviates from perfect submission as a handmaid, but she does not radically reject her condition of servitude, as some other characters in the novel do. So, we might wonder if seduction serves any subversive function in Atwood’s novel. Does it open up any possibilities for contesting power relations or gender roles? Furthermore, erotic pleasure is not the aim of this encounter, so we are left wondering what the stakes of this perverse scenario are, aside from the declared intent of procreation. Moreover, what are we to make of her voluntary servitude?

If it is indeed true that Offred chooses this position of servitude, then Juliet Flower MacCannell’s assertion “[t]hat Gilead is [Offred’s] fantasy is not to be doubted” offers a way of making sense of the perverse scenario that is the Ceremony (*Hysteric’s* 210). As MacCannell argues in *The Hysteric’s Guide to the Future Female Subject*, Offred’s relationship with the Commander can be read as an example of a pervert/hysteric couple, and as she argues the real command of Gileadean social and sexual organization is not reproduction; rather it is: “the demand to sacrifice totally her *jouissance* to the *jouissance* of the Other, to obviate her desire” (215). Néstor Braunstein discusses the difficulty of pinning down a definition for *jouissance*, but he does describe the relationship between desire and *jouissance* as one of

“antinomic polarity” (103). Despite the complexity of the term in French and the attendant challenges of translating it, Braunstein offers an incisive explanation of *jouissance*:

*Jouissance* is the dimension discovered by the analytic experience that confronts desire as its opposite pole. If desire is fundamentally lack, lack in being, *jouissance* is positivity, it is a “something lived by the body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure. (104)

Desire points toward a lost and absent object; it is lack in being, and the craving for fulfillment in the encounter with the lost object. Its concrete expression is the phantasy. *Jouissance*, on the other hand, does not point to anything, nor does it serve any purpose whatsoever; it is an unpredictable experience, beyond the pleasure principle, different from any (mythical) encounter. The subject finds himself split by the polarity *jouissance/desire*. This is why desire, phantasy, and pleasure are barriers on the way to *jouissance*. (106-07)

The sacrificial economy of *jouissance* between Offred and the Other as described by MacCannell allows Offred to avoid facing lack and encountering desire because the sacrificial relationship between the hysteric and the Other is not an ethical or real solution to the experience of overwhelming *jouissance* within her. The sacrificial model supposedly solves the dilemma by making the Other responsible for *jouissance* and for placing a limit on *jouissance*, but the Other only exists as an empty point of address. The ethical solution to the experience of *jouissance* is castration, an acceptance of solitude and the impossibility of total satisfaction that is the structural byproduct of the subject’s alienation in language. As an alternative solution to that of



the hysteric/pervert couple, which allows the hysteric to repress *jouissance* within her by making the Other responsible for it, MacCannell suggests the possibility of “feminine castration”: “[a] specifically feminine castration, through a ‘ladies’ way’ of accepting the signifier that grants her a special deal with the unbearable, uncastrated *jouissance* within her—her horror, her Thing” (198).

In her article “Perversion and Hysteria,” Lucie Cantin, elucidates the dynamic governing the pervert/hysteric couple:

It is then clear that the pervert who offers to be the Master takes the place of this Other who will make it possible for the hysteric to avoid castration. The pervert takes on responsibility for the *jouissance* at work in the hysteric (such as that from the hysteric’s mother), by promising a total satisfaction and the occlusion of any encounter with lack. (163)

Thus, Offred’s position as a hysteric allows her to avoid facing the loss entailed by castration; in Lacanian thought, “[c]astration suggests the subject’s entry into the world of irreducible lack and loss, the impossibility of total satisfaction that necessarily accompanies the entry into the symbolic order of language and social law” (Hughes and Malone 27). In regard to unconscious sexualization, the hysteric remains indecisive with respect to the question: “Am I a man or a woman?”, and because the acceptance of castration is a prerequisite to joining the social order as a sexed subject, the hysteric cannot assume an ethical social position (MacCannell *Hysteric’s* 12, 32). A further consequence of the failure to accept castration, as MacCannell points out, is that the hysteric cannot emerge as an ethical feminine subject who pursues her own desire because desire is predicated on the experience of loss and the lack of satisfaction (*Hysteric’s* 196, 198).

As clearly demonstrated in the performance of the Ceremony, sexual conduct and sexual practices—at least on the official level—are limited to biological functions with a strict aim of reproduction; expressions of desire and lust are prohibited. The Gileadean regime is also concerned with population control and eugenics; that is, it aims to increase the white population. Thus, Puritanical morality and racism are the foundations of sexual conduct in Gilead. The regulation of sexuality as a strictly biological function is completely opposed to the understanding of human sexuality as proposed by psychoanalytic theory, as Charles Shephardson explains,

Thus, sexuality is not governed by *the laws of nature*, or reducible to an instinctual force; on the contrary, the sexual drive departs from the natural pathway of instinct precisely in so far as the drive is *subject to representation*, which Freud speaks of in terms of ‘displacement,’ ‘condensation,’ ‘substitution,’ and so on. The *energy* of human sexuality is therefore not a purely biological energy, a ‘physics of libido’ governed by natural laws—chemistry or biology or mechanics—but is rather an energy regulated by *the laws of language*, the laws of representation. (167)

Even though Offred is outwardly compliant in her duties as a handmaid, she nonetheless indulges in inventing hypothetical scenarios, “what if” situations in which she imagines alternate actions unfolding other than the one she actually experiences, and we see that she at least recognizes the impossibility of the official policy on sexuality.

While Offred is at the training center, she recounts a fantasy shared by the handmaids of seducing the Angels, a division of military men who guard the training facility, as she says, “Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (4). The collective

nature of the fantasy speaks to its status as an enactment of prevalent gender stereotypes; women gain small favors by trading on their role as sex objects for men. In this instance, the seduction scenario is constructed along conventional lines of sexual desirability and attractiveness. At an early point in her role as a handmaid, Offred imagines how she might seduce the young male Guardians who police the checkpoints: “What if I were to come at night, when he’s on duty alone—though he would never be allowed such solitude—and permit him beyond my white wings? What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to him, to them, by the uncertain light of the lanterns?” (21). The possibility is phrased as a question, and it is a dare that goes to the heart of the regime’s attempt to eradicate eroticism.

Offred’s internal narration often presents subversive scenarios that contradict the surface appearance of order and discipline that characterizes the exterior space of Gilead. Yet, the scenario is only subversive in that it imagines a violation of the Gileadean rules of sexual conduct; in other respects, Offred’s supposedly daring attempt at seduction is in total conformity to stereotypical heterosexual patterns of seduction in which a woman presents her body as an object of desire to a male subject. We see that seduction can be a strategy for eliciting the erotic desire of another person, but this fascination with strategies of seduction is a ruse for the real issue of the psychoanalytic fantasy of seduction in which the ego comes into being as an object of desire for the Other. Offred’s passivity is part of a precarious balancing act in which she is the object for the Other; it allows her to maintain the fantasy in a static condition. She is able to avoid agency and to sidestep responsibility as a desiring subject by maintaining the seduction fantasy.

Other than her daily shopping excursion, which takes her into the center of town, Offred rarely has much to do with her days, or her nights for that matter. In

fact, she frequently spends time thinking about the empty hours that must be idled away somehow or another:

There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for—the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound. . . . I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. . . . They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom. (69)

Like the women in these nineteenth-century paintings, Offred is also a sex object of sorts, though her status as such is rather ironic. Handmaids are cloaked from head to foot in long, loose red gowns, and nothing about their appearance is meant to elicit the lust of a male viewer. Yet, Offred's milieu could be said to resemble a harem in that she mostly lives in a woman's world. Gilead is divided into male and female spaces, and strict guidelines, at least officially, prohibit any crossovers between them. The paintings are also notable in that they are fantasies, or male projections of what harems were like, since as Offred tells us, they were “painted by men who'd never been there” (69). Unlike the male painter who presents a fanciful evocation of female life, the narrator is in a privileged, insider's position, providing an eye-witness account of the realities of women's lives in Gilead. To a certain extent, the image of the women in “suspended animation” and the idea of “the long parentheses of nothing” (69) accurately characterize the empty hours of Offred's life, which she refers to as “blank time” (70). On the other hand, Offred quickly fills in the “blank time” of the present

moment with her memories of prior visits to art galleries, and the layering of present and past in her imagination suggests a movement between daily lived experience and psychic reality.

Atwood entitles the fourth section of her novel, “Waiting Room,” and the dynamic of space and time as implied in this title points toward the temporal dimension of the future and the spatial dimension of a physical place. Just as the title “Waiting Room” gestures, at least in part, toward a future moment, the many images of blankness and emptiness in the text also suggest a potentiality, something waiting to be written or created. A waiting room also refers to a state of suspended activity, which coincides with Offred’s listless attitude and her passive behavior. The concept of blankness is related to Offred’s passivity and to the idea of waiting because all three evoke a state of inactivity, and blankness also suggests the possibility of forgetfulness, or even repression, as in the familiar phrase: “I’m drawing a blank.” In his 1915 essay “Repression,” Freud explains,

repression is not a defensive mechanism which is present from the very beginning, and that it cannot arise until a sharp cleavage has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity—that *the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.* (147, emphasis in the original)

In Freud’s case history on *Dora*, he also discusses the characteristic gaps in memory which signal repression, and the reoccurrence of blanks in the text cause us to wonder if there is something (the repressed) behind the blank (5, 11). By maintaining the seduction fantasy, Offred represses the inevitable truth that is the lack in the Other, a lack that is at the center of the subject’s address to the Other, and this lack is illuminated through the preponderance of blank and empty spaces in Atwood’s text.

Yet, repression and its relation to a traumatic incident in the past is only one aspect of the significance of blankness and emptiness.

The temporal dimension of the future is evoked by the expectation of an event that would come at the end of the period of waiting, and the opportunity for artistic creation offered by the drive to fill in the blank spaces raises the possibility of sublimation. If Offred finds a way to accept castration, which is understood as an effect of language on the human subject that results in a loss of a natural object for the drives and the absence of the Other,<sup>57</sup> then the effects of repression will be loosened and the possibility of sublimation can become real. Sublimation takes the form of creative work that can develop new ways of dealing with the disruptive energies of the drive, or *jouissance*.<sup>58</sup> The emphasis on emptiness in Lacan's *Ethics Seminar: Book VII* (1959-1960), and its relation to sublimation also elucidates the significance of emptiness and blanks in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The status of the Thing is also a central concern of the *Ethics* seminar:

This Thing, all forms of which created by man belong to the sphere of sublimation, this Thing will always be represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else – or, more exactly, because it can only be represented by something else. But in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative. (130)

The Thing is Freud's *das Ding*, the Mother, what Lacan describes as “the object of incest, [which] is a forbidden good” (*Ethics* 70), and he goes on to explain that *das Ding* is “the Other whose primacy of position Freud affirms in the form of something *entfremdet*, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me, something that

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<sup>57</sup> I am drawing on McNulty's explanation of castration theory in “Feminine Love and the Pauline Universal”; see pp. 192, 204, 206.

<sup>58</sup> For this account of sublimation, I am drawing on MacCannell's discussion of feminine *jouissance*, the Thing, sublimation, and art; see pp. 238-39 in *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject*.

on the level of the unconscious only a representation can represent” (*Ethics* 71). If *das Ding* is “a forbidden good” (*Ethics* 70), then a subject cannot satisfy his or her desire by direct access to *das Ding*, but sublimation provides an opportunity for the drive to receive partial satisfaction, or to sustain desire even while accepting the impossibility of total fulfillment, through intellectual or artistic pursuits.

Images of blankness and emptiness are central to Atwood’s text, and such images appear in four main categories: time, physical objects, the female body, especially the womb, and narrative, either written or verbal. For Offred, time is a blank, a gaping hole, a void in which her boredom expands, and she reflects on the relation between time and space: “Waiting is also a place: it is wherever you wait. For me it’s this room. I am a blank, here, between parentheses” (227-28). For Offred, waiting is a metaphorical space of suspension or expectation in which she experiences the mundane, and it is also a literal space—she calls her room in the Commander’s house “a waiting room” (50). A waiting room is a common area in the offices of health and business professionals, and so to call her own room a waiting room suggests the collapse of public and private spheres. In Gilead, the highly regimented roles for men and women leave little room for individuality, resulting in scant distinction between public and private realms. Whereas the line between public and private spaces is indistinct, the line between male and female spaces is hard and fast, so Offred is startled, even alarmed, when she discovers the Commander intruding upon what she is surprised into calling her room: “My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time” (50), but her statement reads more like a concession than an assertion of rights, reflecting her passivity and apathy. On a literal level, the segregation of male and female spaces relates to issues of gender politics as they play out in Gilead, especially in regard to reproduction, but the division of physical space into male and female is also one way in which the novel

metaphorically evokes the psychoanalytic subject of sexual difference. That is, sexual difference understood in a Lacanian sense as the way in which a subject aligns himself or herself with respect to castration by language, the process by which the subject experiences the loss of natural aims and accepts the absence of the Other.<sup>59</sup>

Although the Commander's interactions with Offred are supposed to be limited to the Ceremony, he seeks out her company and invites her to his office (strictly speaking, it is not an invitation she could refuse). Offred is trespassing by venturing into this strictly male territory, as her reflections on her first visit to his office reveal: "I raise my hand, knock, on the door of this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go. Not even Serena Joy [his wife] comes here, and the cleaning is done by Guardians" (136-37). In contrast to the barrenness of her room, Offred finds a plethora of contraband items in the Commander's office, including books, women's magazines, and games, most notably Scrabble. When she transgresses against the rules governing male and female spaces by entering his office, Offred says, "Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved" (157). The Commander allows, even encourages, Offred to read, and once he even permits her to write. The complicity that develops between them changes their official, public interactions with each other, and she starts to abandon her posture of blind obedience to the Commander, at least in these private interactions with him. After Offred sarcastically replies to him, she addresses the reader with this aside: "You can see from the way I was speaking to him that we were already on different terms" (162).

One night during the Ceremony, Offred reports that the Commander nearly reveals their secret by making an attempt to stroke her face, a prohibited gesture of

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<sup>59</sup> In *Encore*, Lacan announces "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship ..." (59), in reference to the different ways in which a masculine or feminine subject accepts castration. I am also drawing on McNulty's account of sexual difference in "Feminine Love and the Pauline Universal"; see pp. 193, 206.



intimacy. Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, would surely suspect something if she were to notice her husband's deviation from proscribed ritual. Offred warns the Commander not to slip up like that again: "You could get me transferred, I said. To the Colonies. You know that. Or worse. I thought he should continue to act, in public, as if I were a large vase or a window: part of the background, inanimate or transparent" (162). The personal and private interactions between the two inevitably start to influence their public conduct, try as they might to avoid this.<sup>60</sup> In this same chapter, Offred continues to meditate on the nature of her relationship with the Commander:

But even so, and stupidly enough, I'm happier than I was before. It's something to do, for one thing. Something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room. It's something else to think about. I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow.

And I for him. To him I'm no longer merely a usable body. To him I'm not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven—to be crude—minus the bun. To him I am not merely empty. (163)

Offred again draws a connection between empty time and space, and her time with the Commander assuages the long and boring hours of a typical day which she must face. The state of being transparent, like the vase or window in the example quoted above, is like being flat, like "a shadow," or like being empty as in the series of clichés and metaphors that Offred cites. Her illicit meetings with the Commander "fill the time," as she puts it (163), and from his perspective, Offred is no longer a nonentity.

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<sup>60</sup> My thinking on the private versus public interactions of the Commander and Offred has been influenced by MacCannell's analysis of Sophie Calle's experiment with Paul Auster, as MacCannell writes: "*Double Game's* implied claim is that private sexual arrangements can amend public life. It strains credulity. But there it is" ("Death Drive" 71).

However, their secret relationship does not remain secret: Serena Joy learns of it, and it seems very likely that the government's spy network learns of the Commander's infractions, which means that he will lose his position and most likely his life as well.

Toward the end of the novel, the Commander surreptitiously escorts Offred to an illegal but tolerated whorehouse, known as Jezebel's, for elite officials and foreign visitors. Aside from the obvious point of exposing the hypocrisy of the regime's elite, we also see how empty and formulaic the rituals of heterosexual seduction have become. The women are dressed in tattered and tawdry costumes of Playboy bunnies, cheerleaders, and the like, and the sad state of their outfits conveys the pathetic and hackneyed quality of the whole routine. As in the scenarios that Offred imagines involving the Angels and the Guardians, women are performing the role of seductress to please the male viewer, and this scenario again reinforces a male-dominated power structure of gender relations. Atwood, however, complicates the critique of seduction by showing that the attempt to seduce is a male as well as a female endeavor, as the Commander is the one attempting to seduce Offred. Offred realizes that the Commander's flouting of the rules is his way of "showing off to me" (236), and he engages in other innuendos meant to convince her that he is well-versed in the rites of seduction, such as the look he gives her after getting a key to a room: "He shows it to me, slyly. I am to understand" (251). Previously, we see Offred submitting to the prescribed sexual rites of the Ceremony, and this is largely because passivity is the only thing required of her. Now, in the private setting of the hotel room, the Commander wants to introduce an erotic element into their sexual encounter, but she balks at his proposition, saying "I lie there like a dead bird" (255), as he starts to undress her. The darkly comic image of Offred as a "dead bird" lying on the bed in her tattered outfit shows how the Commander's attempts at seduction have utterly failed, and she internally shouts: "Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head" (255).

Offred's behavior is in dramatic contrast to her submission during the Ceremony, which requires only her passivity, but the demand to exhibit signs of pleasure is a radical challenge to her detached posture.

From the start of her interactions with the Commander, Offred expresses ambivalence toward him: "I ought to feel hatred for this man. I know I ought to feel it, but it isn't what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love" (58). Just as he does at Jezebel's, the Commander relies on stereotyped and staged behavior to seduce Offred on the first occasion of her visit to his office: "It's such a studied pose, something of the country squire, some old come-on from a glossy men's mag. He probably decided ahead of time that he'd be standing like that when I came in" (137). The Commander wants to look relaxed and casual as he stands in front of the fireplace, but the actual circumstances of their meeting make his pose, "some old come-on from a glossy men's mag," seem all the more absurd.

After one of their many rounds of Scrabble, Offred comments on the way the Commander plays with the dynamic of domination and submission: "Sometimes, after the games, he sits on the floor beside my chair, holding my hand. His head is a little below mine, so that when he looks up at me it's at a juvenile angle. It must amuse him, this fake subservience" (210). With his head poised "at a juvenile angle" and his posture of "fake subservience" (210), the Commander is enacting the seduction that Hartman describes as "a strategic disavowal of power" (103). Like the slaveholders of the antebellum South, the Commander wants to "mask" the reality of the violent means that secure his dominant position, and he wants to extract something along the lines of consent or approval from Offred. Offred knows that his desire to secure her complicity in the power structure of Gilead offers a small but not insignificant opening for her to trouble the balance of power between them, as she muses, "It's difficult for

me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it's of an equivocal kind" (210). Offred also knows that the Commander is vulnerable, at least to some extent during their meetings, and she speculates on how she could attempt to injure him by pretending to invite intimacy only to strike him with a sharp object as he comes close to her. She says, "I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands" (140). Yet, Offred quickly dismisses this possibility, claiming that "[i]n fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards" (140). She chooses not to exploit the opportunities created by his efforts to seduce her; instead, she asks for hand cream, a modest request. Offred's shopping partner, Ofglen, is a member of an underground resistance movement, and she encourages Offred to join the movement by spying on the Commander. But, Offred's actions are not directed toward the goal of escape or of support for the underground movement. It seems possible that Offred could use seductive stratagems to exert agency for subversive purposes, but, with the Commander, she generally remains in a passive role, allowing him to direct their relationship. Through their interactions, however, Atwood exposes the limitations and hollowness of conventional romantic codes by stressing the Commander's reliance on false and flat seductive routines.

Serena Joy sets Offred up with the chauffeur, Nick, in an attempt to get her pregnant because this event would both advance Serena Joy's social standing and secure the Commander's career. Nick, however, does not wait for Serena's instructions to begin his flirtations with Offred; in the beginning of the novel, she passes by him and "he winks" (18), suggesting his interest and willingness to break the rules. While the whole household is assembled for the prayers preceding the Ceremony, he also flirts with her by pushing his shoe up against hers (81). At first, Offred rebuffs his advances, but, when the two meet in the still of the night, Offred admits to her longing to touch him and to be touched by him: "I want to reach up, taste

his skin, he makes me hungry” (98). Although she takes pleasure in imagining what it would be like to commit the sacrilege of having sex with Nick in Serena’s parlor, neither of them can take such a huge risk. After Serena arranges for them to have sex in the relative privacy of Nick’s studio apartment, Offred rehearses a number of different scenarios involving conventional romance narratives, but then she denies that any of the scenarios that she has just related truly describe how their affair begins: “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate” (263).

Offred’s narrative equivocations demonstrate how difficult it is to have a sexual relationship that is not deformed by conventional gender roles and rites. Of the coy banter that they supposedly exchange, she says, “Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning” (262). Such a statement implies that desire requires different linguistic and cultural codes in order to be expressed and that the scripted roles of seduction, with the roles of seducer and seduced, agent and victim, should be revised, rewritten, or outright rejected. Atwood is addressing the question of how to express desire, and Offred’s difficulty in describing their relationship evokes Lacan’s pronouncement “that there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” (*Encore* 59). The masculine subject’s response to the lack of the sexual relation is to seek phallic jouissance and to compensate for the failure of the relation by seeking in his partner the object *a*, “the cause of his desire” (*Encore* 63, 72, 80). For the feminine subject, Lacan postulates that “for Woman, something other than object *a* is at stake in what comes to make up for (*suppléer*) the sexual relationship that does not exist” (*Encore* 63). Even the fact that Lacan insists that ~~Woman~~ be written “with the slanted line with which I designate what must be barred” reveals the problems with signification and a feminine subject’s relationship to castration and the symbolic order (*Encore* 63). Lacan speaks of the feminine subject’s

relationship to “a supplementary jouissance,” and the apparent impossibility of speaking about this jouissance (*Encore* 73, 74-75), which is very different from the masculine subject’s response to the lack of a sexual relation through an approach to object *a* through fantasy. Atwood’s depiction of Offred’s inability to describe her meetings with Nick suggests the limitations of the symbolic order, and she proposes that creating better ways of expressing desire and love in new symbolic forms and through different gender expectations would be a possible first step out of passive compliance to the will of others.

Despite the risk and the precariousness of their situation, Offred and Nick become regular lovers. Madonne Miner reads *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a critique of romance plots, and she argues that Nick “functions as a fairy-tale prince” through his apparent rescue of Offred at the novel’s conclusion (161). Such a reading emphasizes Offred’s passive stance and places her in a stereotypical feminine role of victim, but in actuality there are not any hard and fast lines between victim and hero in their relationship. And, Atwood certainly does not leave us with a happily ever after ending. It is also notable that their affair brings about the ruin of the Commander’s career; as Offred is led away from the Commander’s house, she ominously remarks: “I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking. There have already been purges among them, there will be more” (294). Another consequence of their affair appears to be less liberating; Offred explicitly states that her affair discourages her from attempting to escape: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here with Nick, where I can get at him” (271). But, Offred has previously defined being “here with Nick” as a space outside of official Gileadean discourse and policy: “Being here with him is safety; it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside” (269). A cave is a rare instance in which an interior space created by nature is mentioned in the text, and such a space further

demonstrates how distant their relationship is from the boundaries of Gilead. The stakes of their relationship are very complicated, and, while their relationship does not offer a wide-ranging solution to the problems of sexual relations and of desire that are posed in the novel, it does lead to a small collapse of the oppressive social order.

In contrast to her affair with Nick, Offred draws a connection between her husband, Luke, and the Commander partly through the imagery of emptiness and blankness.<sup>61</sup> In addition to the abstract image of “blank time” (70), as has been previously discussed, Offred also describes various physical objects as “blank” or “empty.” For instance, the brick wall that surrounds the former Harvard University, which is now a regime headquarters, has become a site of terror, a place where the dead bodies of traitors and resisters to the regime are hanged, as Offred remarks: “Somehow the Wall is even more foreboding when it’s empty like this. When there’s someone hanging on it at least you know the worst. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching” (166). The emptiness of the Wall is menacing because of the uncertainty of not-knowing who will next appear on the Wall but also because of the certainty that someone will be sure to appear there. Offred fears discovering Luke, her husband from what she calls the Time Before, hanging on the Wall, and while walking through town to do her shopping errands, Offred and Ofglen pause before the Wall. Upon ascertaining that none of the bodies hanging from the Wall is that of her husband, Offred says, “What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke” (33). “Blankness” is the emotion of detachment and apathy, which characterizes Offred’s

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<sup>61</sup> See MacCannell for an astute comparison of the Commander and Luke in which she argues that “[Offred’s] Commander in Gilead is clearly no more (no less) than an exaggerated aspect of Luke ...” (*Hysteric’s* 210). Miner also offers a persuasive critique of Luke and compares him to the Commander; see pp. 157-159.

state throughout much of the narrative, and the images of blankness and emptiness are conjoined with material objects and emotional states.

The Commander takes Offred to the same hotel where she previously meets with Luke, prior to his divorce from his first wife. As we have seen, Offred dreads having sex with the Commander under the simulated conditions of a romantic evening; to avoid this moment, she lingers in the bathroom, focusing on “the blank towels”: “I sit on the edge of the bathtub, gazing at the blank towels. Once they would have excited me. They would have meant the aftermath, of love” (252). “Blank” is an unusual word to pair with “towels.” Instead, the reader might expect white, clean, or fresh as an adjective which would modify the noun towels, but the adjective blank connects with the feelings of terror associated with the bodies on the Wall and the emotional remoteness of the narrator, suggesting that the prospect of an illicit sexual encounter with the Commander is hardly appealing from Offred’s perspective. Because she is in the same hotel as the one she previously visits with Luke, it suggests that the nature of her relationship with the Commander is very similar to that of her relationship with Luke.

Arguably, the most important and surely the most frequently described object of blankness and emptiness is the space on the ceiling in Offred’s room where the chandelier has been removed. The constantly morphing space on the ceiling, which has been plastered over after the removal of the chandelier, suggests two different vicissitudes of the drive: repression and sublimation. It signifies repression in so far as we wonder what has been plastered over, what is behind the blank, empty space. And, this space gestures toward sublimation in that it offers imaginative and creative possibilities in the shapes that the space assumes. Offred’s predecessor hanged herself from the light fixture, thus necessitating its removal to prevent any future incidents of this kind. Yet, the absence of the chandelier captivates Offred’s imagination; when



she is in her room, a point of fixation for Offred is the plaster ornamentation on the ceiling, which is first described as “a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out” (7). The simile that compares the missing chandelier to “the place in a face where the eye has been taken out” is a strange way of talking about the disfigurement of a face (7). The image of gouging an eye also calls to mind Oedipus’s veiled allusion to castration through his action of blinding himself; thus, the space suggests the penalty for transgressing beyond prohibitions. However, in this instance, no agent of violence is named; rather, an anonymous person or collectivity performs this action. The image of the eye, even if the eye is absent or blind, signifies the presence of the gaze, and Offred’s preoccupation with the eye also suggests the presence of the Other to whom she directs her address. While she lies awake in bed one night, Offred imagines the eye watching her, as she says: “In the semidark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can’t see” (97). In Gilead, no one escapes from the all-encompassing network of surveillance, and even in what used to be the private retreat of a bedroom, Offred lacks anything resembling privacy. Certainly, the image of the eye evokes a key disciplinary mechanism of a totalitarian government, the omnipresent gaze of authority, but the blind or missing eye also points to the absent Other at the center of human address.

Offred is obsessed with “the blank space” on her ceiling, and, even though it is ostensibly a space of nothingness, it is also always something else, or something more than just a hole. She imagines it to be any number of objects in addition to “the plaster eye in the ceiling” (37) and “the blind plaster eye” (97), and later she describes how it metamorphoses as she stares at it:

I look up at the ceiling, tracing the foliage of the wreath. Today it makes me think of a hat, the large-brimmed hats women used to wear at some period during the old days: hats like enormous halos, festooned with fruit and flowers, and the feathers of exotic birds; hats like an idea of paradise, floating just above the head, a thought solidified. (128)

On this particular day, Offred joins the other handmaids for a birth ceremony because one of the other handmaids (Ofwarren) is giving birth and the rest of the handmaids gather to support her. It is a festive event in that the birth of a baby is a triumph for the handmaids but also a bittersweet occasion because they remember the births of their own children who have been taken away from them. After she returns from the Ceremony, Offred lies in bed and beholds the transformation of the ceiling ornament and the hole at the center of it into an old-fashioned and showy hat, which reminds her of parties and social gatherings, but such events are very distant from the present time as indicated by the outmoded fashion of the hat. In this instance, we see a movement from a material object of the hat to the immaterial idea of “a thought solidified” (128), emphasizing the shifting mental representations that the empty space assumes in Offred’s mind.

On a later occasion, she sits in her room, and the space assumes yet another form: “I sit in my chair, the wreath on the ceiling floating above my head, like a frozen halo, a zero. A hole in space where a star exploded. A ring, on water, where a stone’s been thrown. All things white and circular” (200). The hole is produced by an explosion or a stone disrupting the surface of the water, suggesting the violent nature of the hole’s creation, and the equation of the ceiling ornament to “a frozen halo, a zero” evokes the nothingness or emptiness that indicates the Thing—the way in which the Thing resists representation. The circle imagery is reinforced as Offred envisions the blank circular space as a charm:

I look up at the ceiling, the round circle of plaster flowers. Draw a circle, step into it, it will protect you. From the center was the chandelier, and from the chandelier a twisted strip of sheet was hanging down. That's where she was swinging, just lightly, like a pendulum; the way you could swing as a child, hanging by your hands from a tree branch. She was safe then, protected altogether, by the time Cora [a Martha, or housemaid] opened the door.

Sometimes I think she's still in here, with me. (211)

Offred pictures the suicide of the former handmaid as a game of child's play, making the actual suicide seem surreal. All of her imaginings of the various objects that the hole assumes repress the actual cause of the hole in the ceiling, and, despite the fact that she clearly knows that the hole is created by the removal of the chandelier, she rarely ever references the handmaid's suicide, revealing her wish to distance herself from this event and to disavow its reality. The act of suicide is in opposition to Offred's acceptance of her servitude, and consequently she blocks out the act of suicide from her consciousness.

As I mentioned earlier, images of blankness and emptiness are also associated with the female body, and the dominant and determining fact of Offred's status is her empty womb, as her own conception of her body reveals, "I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black" (73-74). If Offred were to become pregnant, she would be saved, meaning that she would never be declared an Unwomen, though it is not really clear what advantages that would entail. Presumably, she would not be sent to the dreaded Colonies where workers clean up toxic waste, but we do not really know anything about the fate of handmaids who successfully bear children because none are depicted in the novel. The handmaids are

indoctrinated with religious ideology, and they are taught to pray for emptiness, as Offred recalls: “What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (194). The prayer moves from spiritual values to the hard facts of biology, the “semen and babies,” and the handmaid is supposed to be nothing more than a cipher in the childbearing process.

Toward the end of the novel, Offred realizes that she is vulnerable and that she could be convicted of state crimes and thus subject to the death penalty, and she prays in earnestness and in desperation: “I’ll obliterate myself, if that’s what you really want; I’ll empty myself, truly, become a chalice” (286). During the course of the novel, Offred engages in a number of transgressive activities, secretly meeting with the Commander and taking Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur who doubles as a government spy, as her lover. Even though it is doubtful that Offred believes in God, the urgency of the moment leads her to this belated prayer of repentance. The comparison of her body to a vessel, the chalice, again stresses the role of her body as an instrument for fulfilling the regime’s command that she reproduce. Her claim that “I’ll empty myself, truly, become a chalice” implies that (286), up to this point, she has not fully sacrificed herself to the service of the regime. She only makes this declaration in the face of a crisis; nevertheless, her failure to submit entirely leaves open the possibility that she can assume the status of a subject, rather than being trapped in the object position.

Offred classifies her oral narration as a “reconstruction”: “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn’t have said, what I should or shouldn’t have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here—” (134). In the same section, she goes on to lament the inadequacy of language: “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be

exact, you always have to leave something out ...” (134). While Offred rightly comments on the lack of a direct correspondence between reality and representation, it is not at all clear that she wants her narration to be a faithful recording of her experiences. Offred can be an unreliable and even a reluctant narrator, as evidenced by her explicit statement: “I don’t want to be telling this story” (225). When Offred labels her narration a reconstruction, she often insinuates that what she is saying is a fiction, in the sense of it being a lie. As we have seen, when she first goes to Nick’s room to have sex with him, she recounts different versions of the way they break the ice, so to speak, as they initiate what becomes an affair. Twice Offred retracts her narration of the event, first saying: “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened” (261). And, then adding a new disclaimer after giving another version of the events: “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly” (263). Offred relates multiple versions of the events but never identifies which one, if any of them, is the true one. Atwood is self-consciously playing with the issues of narrative (in)stability, as well as narrative authority, by revealing that the text itself has been reconstructed from a series of tape recordings whose original ordering is still somewhat uncertain.

Yet, the multiple or hypothetical scenarios are not the only liberties taken by the narrator. At an early point in the novel, Offred remembers the time before the Gileadean takeover, and she claims that even in the previous period the space outside of official public discourse allows for greater possibilities: “We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories” (57). When she makes this statement, Offred is recalling the stories of women who were victims of violent crimes, and one of the ways in which the regime justifies itself is by declaring that the new strict regulation of the social order provides a safer environment for

women. Understood metaphorically, the “blank white spaces” create an opportunity to imagine what is not signified or what is waiting to be signified (57), and it alludes to a potential narrative space, one not readily accessible through current social and linguistic discourse. Since the “we” presumably refers to women, “the blank white spaces” may also indicate the marginal status of women’s discourse and the failure of language to symbolize fully their desire (57).

Toward the end of the novel, Offred sits in her room meditating on space, waiting, and language: “I am a blank, here, between parentheses” (228). Offred locates herself in language, “here, between the parentheses” (228), and the space enclosed by the parentheses is outside of the flow of standard discourse, offering a break, interruption, or pause. The space “between the parentheses” relates to Lacan’s declaration in his *Encore* seminar that “if what I claim is true— namely, that woman is not-whole—there is always something in her that escapes discourse” (33). The idea of woman being “not-whole”, as Lacan puts it (33), is also related to a feminine subject’s experience of feminine jouissance. Lacan describes feminine jouissance as “the one concerning which woman doesn’t breathe a word, perhaps because she doesn’t know it, the one that makes her not-whole” (60), and he offers this additional theorization of feminine jouissance: “The fact remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely in the following respect: being not-whole, she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance” (*Encore* 73). Tracy McNulty explains the connection between the overwhelming experience of feminine jouissance and the signifier in the following terms: “‘not-all under the phallic function’ means not wholly inscribed within the signifier that limits jouissance (and thus subject to an excess that the signifier is unable to limit)” (“Feminine” 206). The excessive quality of femininity, which the phallic function

cannot treat, relates to the non-signified element concealed in “the blank white spaces” of Offred’s narration (57).

First, the hysteric’s work of repressing the drive, or the *jouissance* within her, must be undone; what’s behind the blank must be revealed. Then, the task ahead is to find a way to express the experience of feminine *jouissance*, which is related to the images of blankness and emptiness that are associated with narrative, either written or spoken, in Atwood’s text. The space “between the parentheses” could also be seen as a hole of sorts, and the blank space is a mark of nothingness that invites creation of a new mode of narration or signification. The description of “blank space” in the initial description of the ceiling ornament links up with “the blank white spaces at the edges of print” (57), and Offred’s identification of herself as “a blank” draws a connection among all three (228). As we have seen, images of blankness and emptiness, as well as the words themselves, are dominant within the text, revealing problems with signification and being. And, because empty and blank spaces are also associated with feminine *jouissance*, attention should be paid to the problematic of femininity in order to bring about the new ways of signification and being that could fill in the blank and empty spaces.

In both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, seduction is, to borrow Hartman’s phrase, one of “the ruses of power” (79), that masters employ to maintain their position of dominance. In her relations with Dr. Flint, Jacobs makes clear the dangers of being reduced to an erotic object, whose sole purpose is to satisfy her master’s desire. In her textual account of their relationship, Jacobs, however, resists her master by refusing to become his mistress; thus, she inhabits the role of the virtuous woman who is being assailed by an unscrupulous suitor. In the position of virtuous woman, Jacobs is able to garner support for the abolitionist cause, and she takes advantage of the ambiguous power relations of

seduction to further her goal of achieving legal independence by escaping from slavery. In Jacobs's narrative, seduction functions as a mode of contesting authority, especially those figures supporting the institution of slavery.

Atwood treats many of the same issues that Jacobs raises in her slave narrative, including sexual exploitation, the rupture of kinship bonds, oppressive systems of control, and the perverse relations between master and slave, or to use the terms of her novel, *Commander and handmaid*. Despite heavily drawing on the slave narrative as a model for her novel, Atwood radically departs from this source by portraying Offred's voluntary servitude in contrast to Jacobs's forced servitude. The mystery of Offred's servitude is solved by analyzing the scenes and uses of seduction. Atwood's novel calls for a further interrogation of seduction; by considering the seduction fantasy as the psychic process in which the ego is formed as the object of the Other's desire, the mystery of Offred's servitude and passivity is solved. Although both Atwood and Jacobs show the dangers of being in the object position, Atwood focuses on the problem of envisioning feminine desire by exposing the problem of limiting women's desire to being an object for the male subject and by calling attention to the restrictions imposed on the expression of desire by language. The historical and the imagined captivity scenarios depicted by Jacobs and Atwood respectively revolve around the phenomenon of seduction to consider the entanglement of desire and agency, and both texts show that oppressive structures of authority and, at least in the case of Atwood's novel, even the symbolic order must be challenged so that women's agency and desire can be liberated.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Dissolution of the Dialectic of Domination and Submission in Réage's *Story of O*

Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1954) begins and ends with the presentation of alternate possibilities concerning the destiny of the novel's heroine, O, which poses considerable narrative challenges to the reader of her text. The first version of the opening scene describes O and her lover, René, traveling in an unmarked taxi to the château at Roissy where O will be instructed as a love slave, and during this car ride, O obediently heeds René's request that she strip off her undergarments and relinquish her purse in preparation for her arrival at the château. In the second account of the car ride, an "unknown friend" drives O and René to Roissy, and the unknown friend both informs O of their destination and tells O that René "[is] going to tie her hands behind her back, unfasten her stockings and roll them down, remove her garter belt, her panties, and her brassiere, and blindfold her" (5). Although she is acting on René's orders, O nevertheless exhibits a fair amount of agency in the initial description, and she even enters the château alone. Not only is O much more passive in the second narration, René also plays a subordinate role because he too appears to be following the directives of the unknown friend. With her hands tied and eyes blindfolded, O closely resembles a hostage, and her vulnerability and passivity are emphasized in comparison to those around her. While there is no suggestion that O would resist efforts to compel her to enter the château, the image of her in bondage insinuates that something in her is unruly and in need of restraint, and it further implies that the unchecked something inside of her is outside of her conscious control because, on a conscious level, she is clearly willing to obey these men.

The bound hands and the blindfolded eyes are, in a sense, counterbalanced by the accessibility of her sexual organs, as the narrator puts it: “her breasts are naked and free, as is the rest of her body, from waist to knee” (5). Throughout the novel, the extreme attention paid to O’s erogenous zones emphasizes her de-personalized status; the command to make available her erogenous zones for the men highlights O’s role as an object, even as the object *a*, the object cause of desire.<sup>62</sup> More so than the first description, the second account highlights the tension between captivity and freedom, a major theme of the text, and it introduces this tension in relation to sexuality. The reference to the “unknown friend” who drives the car and provides instructions to René and to O raises the question of who is controlling the scenario. The “unknown friend” also introduces the vital third party into the dyad of the dominating/dominated paradigm of the couple; the third party alludes to the absent Other, the emptiness at the heart of human address.<sup>63</sup> The anonymity of the friend points to the difficulty of locating the source of power and control in *Story of O*, a novel which is very much about the dialectic of domination and submission.

The details of the two opening scenarios vary slightly but significantly, yet neither of the two offers any hint as to why O is following the commands of these men. The alternate beginnings also point to the limitations of language in regard to its ability to capture objective and subjective experiences, and the relationships among language, narrative structure, sexuality, and agency are central concerns of the text. The destabilization of narrative authority implied by the two openings complicates any attempt to probe O’s intentions and motivations because such variations render it doubtful as to whether or not the narrative voice can provide definitive explanations for her behavior. The enigmatic portrait of O as a willing captive incites the reader’s

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<sup>62</sup> See Hughes and Malone for a summary of this concept, pp. 29-30.

<sup>63</sup> See Hughes and Malone for an explanation of this term, p. 30, and see Cantin’s “Perversion and Hysteria” for a discussion of the absent Other, p. 158.

curiosity to understand the paradoxical relationship between captivity and freedom as it is staged through the presentation of her body.

In an echo of the two alternate beginnings, Réage presents the reader with two possible endings by inserting editorial comments that appear after the conclusion of the proper boundaries of the narrative. The editorial voice speaks from a position of privileged knowledge about the manuscript and provides the following closing remarks about O's fate:

In a final chapter, which has been suppressed, O returned to Roissy, where she was abandoned by Sir Stephen.

There exists a second ending to the story of O, according to which O, seeing that Sir Stephen was about to leave her, said she would prefer to die. Sir Stephen gave her his consent. (199)

The insertion of the non-diegetic editorial comments is an unusual move, one which calls into question the integrity of the text itself because it both denies the reader narrative closure and suggests that the text has been manipulated before its publication.<sup>64</sup> The reader is informed that something, specifically the final chapter, is missing from the text, and so the final scene in which O is being “possessed” by her masters, Sir Stephen and the Commander, can be read only as a suspension, not a closure, of the narrative (199). After following O's transformations and her progression in the hands of various masters, the reader is certainly invested in learning of her destiny, yet one is left with conjecture rather than a certain outcome concerning

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<sup>64</sup> The storm of controversy over the authorship of *Story of O* following its original publication is also fascinating because the uncertainty over the authorship of the novel played out in the real world as well as the fictional world. See Sabine d'Estrée's "Translator's Note" for a discussion of the public speculation concerning Réage, especially pp. x-xiii. See also Régine Deforges's *Confessions of O: Conversations with Pauline Réage* for Réage's own comments on this, especially p. 13.

O's fate.<sup>65</sup> We are left to speculate why and by whom the final chapter "has been suppressed" (199), and we again face the quandary, which was first encountered with the two opening scenarios, of interpreting two endings. The second ending is an amplification and more extreme version of the first, and like the second version of the text's opening, O's enslavement and passivity is stressed more heavily in the second ending. Compared to the relatively minor order that she hand over her undergarments in the first version of the opening scene, O, according to the second version of the closing scene, receives permission from her master to surrender her life, which offers powerful commentary on the state of her subjection. At this point, O is no longer even responsible for her life; while she does express a preference, she delegates the decision to her master. O's attempt to find a reliable, or an adequate, master proves unsuccessful because Sir Stephen apparently discards her. Sir Stephen's abandonment of her suggests that O has failed in her endeavor to be a perfect love slave for him, although it is not clear why he casts her off. Is it due to his capriciousness? Has she failed to obey him, or has she failed to satisfy him? How does his abandonment of her relate to René's abandonment of O; that is, what are we to make of the series of master who possess O? Could her abandonment by a series of masters be a reflection of their inadequacy rather than of her inadequacy?

In addition to the variable introductions and conclusions to her novel, Réage also employs cagey narrative strategies that obscure the reader's access to O's motivations and desires. Just after O arrives at the château, an omniscient narrator employs the first-person perspective to report on the actions but not the mental states of the characters, and this narrator is an anonymous presence that observes without actually participating in the action. Speaking from the "I" perspective, the narrative

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<sup>65</sup> Of course, this strategy may also arise from a desire to set the stage for a sequel, and Réage did write a sequel, *Return to the Château* (1969). Sabine d' Estrée and Jean Paulhan discuss this possibility see pp. xii and xxvi, respectively.

voice at least provides the illusion that the actions being related have the authenticity of firsthand testimony, and the narrative voice also underscores the importance of the gaze because this narrator is watching and describing O to the reader. The narrator admits that he or she is uncertain about various details, particularly in regard to timing; for example, the narrator remarks that “they left her for half an hour, or an hour, or two hours, I can’t be sure, but it seemed forever” (6). Yet, the narrator is sure of other events and confidently describes how O is bathed and made up by the other slaves according to the rituals of the château. The first-person pronoun “I” quickly fades from the narrative, and the narrator becomes an anonymous presence. The narrator’s anonymity adds to the problem of locating the ultimate source of control or authority in the narrative, and this narrative obscurity is played out thematically because there is a similar challenge to identify the master behind the perverse scenarios staged throughout the text. Assuming the privilege of both telling the story and providing access to O’s thoughts and emotions, the third-person narrator also claims the right to speak for O, which highlights O’s problematic relationship to subjectivity and to language.

After O has been inducted into the château by her masters in the Roissy library, she is left alone in her bedroom for the night, and the narrator recounts O’s ruminations on her recent experiences, exposing O’s ambivalent feelings about her treatment: “O tried to figure out why there was so much sweetness mingled with the terror in her, or why her terror seemed itself so sweet” (22). Just as O is confused about her conflicting emotions and sensations, so too does the narrative commentary leave the reader perplexed as to why she becomes a slave. Throughout the text, the narrator puts forth various speculations (often in the form of parenthetical asides) that offer contradictory explanations of O’s motives and feelings that, in turn, create doubt and uncertainty in the reader’s mind. The first such occasion occurs shortly after the

statement quoted above as O continues her reflections: “[O] realized that one of the things that most distressed her was the fact that she had been deprived of the use of her hands; not that her hands could have defended her (and did she really want to defend herself?), but had they been free they would at least have made the gesture, have made an attempt to repel the hands which seized her ...” (22-23). O’s hands have been bound “as in an attitude of prayer” (22), and her defenselessness and vulnerability are accentuated in this description. Instead of an autonomous subject acting to defend herself, it is only O’s hands that might have put up a defense, and so we already see her body acting in a fragmented fashion without a strong, centralized will guiding its actions. The phrase “as in an attitude of prayer” also calls to mind images of devotion; in fact, as further explication will show, O’s experience goes well beyond the physical level to a mystical dimension. The parenthetical aside, which is phrased as a question, undermines the assertion that she is “distressed” about her captivity (22), and surely it is meant to resonate in the reader’s mind. Instances of parenthetical asides, as well as direct questions that undercut or qualify a preceding declaration, abound, and such narrative ambiguities trouble the reader’s response to the text. The narrative challenge posed by the alternate and multiple scenarios is mirrored in the thematic challenge posed by the seemingly undecidable task of deciphering the connection between pleasure and pain and between domination and submission.

In order to find more fruitful interpretive ground, the reader must consider the presentation of O’s body and its various responses to pleasure and pain in order to gain an understanding of why she submits to the physical tortures. Throughout the text, O’s body is regularly put on display, thoroughly inspected by various masters, and terribly abused through sexual acts and ritual beatings. In fact, her body is more often than not covered with traces of beatings, and a main purpose of these welts and scars

is to make the disruptive force of the erotic drive visible on the surface of her body: the working of *jouissance* leaves its mark all over her body, not just on typically defined erogenous zones, like the orifices. The phenomenon of *jouissance* involves not only ecstatic pleasure but unbearable, ravishing pain, and the unsettling coupling of sex and violence in this text is partly due to its exploration of *jouissance*. In Lacanian thought, phallic *jouissance* is distinguished from feminine *jouissance*; phallic *jouissance* is related to the sexuality of the physical being. On the other hand, feminine *jouissance*, or Other *jouissance*, is related to language and to subjectivity, and it is a force that is not directly tied to biological sexual experiences, as Tracy McNulty elaborates, “[it] is a structural effect of the effraction of the living being by language itself, which produces as its by product a *jouissance* irreducible to the sexual functioning of the organism” (“Solving” 97). Although there are numerous depictions of phallic *jouissance* throughout the text, the more intense and elusive feminine *jouissance* experienced by O will be the main subject of discussion in this paper.<sup>66</sup>

Although O endures physical tortures that arise in sexual scenarios, hers is not a case of masochism as delineated by Gilles Deleuze. The essential characteristic of masochism, according to Deleuze, is that the beater act on the wishes of the beaten, as he puts it: “Likewise the masochistic hero appears to be educated and fashioned by the authoritarian woman whereas basically it is he who forms her, dresses her for the part and prompts the harsh words she addresses to him. It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer, without sparing himself” (22).<sup>67</sup> O does not direct

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<sup>66</sup> My understanding of feminine *jouissance* has also been significantly informed by Lucie Cantin’s explanation of it in “Femininity: From Passion to an Ethics of the Impossible,” especially p. 134.

<sup>67</sup> Slavoj Žižek offers a similar account of the dynamics of masochism: “In his (unpublished) seminar on anxiety (1962-63), Lacan specifies that the true aim of the masochist is not to generate *jouissance* in the Other, but to provide its anxiety. That is to say: although the masochist submits himself to the Other’s torture, although he wants to serve the Other, he himself defines the rules of his servitude; consequently, while he seems to offer himself as the instrument of the Other’s *jouissance*, he effectively discloses his own desire to the Other and thus gives rise to anxiety in the Other – for Lacan, the true object of anxiety is precisely the (over)proximity of the Other’s desire” (21-22).

the scenarios of bondage and humiliation to which she submits, and her aim does not lie in shaping a torturer who fulfills her wishes. As the narrative structure of the text indicates, the source of control is fraught with ambiguity, and O's past relationships with both men and women also reveal a confusing and unstable situation of dominance and submission in each relationship. While there is certainly a strange and shocking mix of sex and violence in *Story of O*, Réage's text does not present a case of a female masochism along the lines of a masochistic relationship such as the one presented in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus and Furs*. Rather, the displays of perverse sexual acts and O's response to them provide evidence of the pain and pleasure involved in the overwhelming experience of jouissance. The perverse sexual scenarios and the novel's complex narrative structure are connected to the project of exploring the feminine position in psychoanalytic terms.

The problem of seduction is fundamental to this text, as it has been in the other captivity narratives examined in this study. The scene of O being driven to the château at Roissy performs the definition of seduction as being lead astray; seduction as a mode of female education is also operative in this text because the point of her stay at Roissy, and later at Samois, is to instruct her in the duties and behaviors of a slave. "Happiness in Slavery," Jean Paulhan's introduction to *Story of O*, proposes that the novel is a love letter: "Without doubt, *Story of O* is the most ardent love letter any man has ever received" (xxx). Elaborating on the novel's resemblance to a love letter, Paulhan writes:

from beginning to end, the story of *O* is managed rather like some brilliant feat. It reminds you more of a speech than a mere effusion; of a letter rather than a secret diary. But to whom is the letter addressed? Whom is the speech trying to convince? Whom can we ask? I don't even know who you are. (xxiv)



Paulhan's posture of ignorance is disingenuous because the love letter was in fact addressed to him. Pauline Réage is the pseudonym for Dominique Aury, author of *Story of O* and the lover of Paulhan. Thus, Paulhan's involvement in publishing the novel and writing the introduction for it reveal his coyness and perhaps his own attempt to seduce the reader by insisting on the enigma both of the author's identity and of O's submission to her servitude. Michael Syrotinski asserts that the novel is Aury's "act of seduction" (74), through which she is "attempting to 'ensnare' Paulhan through the account of her own fantasies of sexual enslavement" (75). The pattern of seduction works on a number of levels; it may start as a personal attempt at seduction by Aury of Paulhan, which is followed by Paulhan's attempt to seduce the reader in his introduction. Thematically, seduction plays a prominent role in the descriptions of O and the other woman at Roissy who fulfill the role of seductress for the men associated with Roissy. O is charged with the task of seducing other women to join the enslaved of Roissy; thus, we can see that seduction is a dominant concern of the novel.

The presence of the unknown friend who drives the car, the narrator who watches O, and the succession of masters suggest the presence of the Other who observes and directs the proceedings. When O first arrives at the château, the narrator speculates that someone may be watching O "through a peephole camouflaged in the wall" (7), and this anonymous but omnipresent gaze is staged throughout the novel. McNulty offers a clarification of the two concepts of the Other, which helps to explain the function of the Other in Réage's text:

In the notion of the Other, we have to distinguish between the Other as such—that is, the field of the Other that Freud discovers by means of the unconscious—and the imaginary Other or Other of seduction. The first is the gap or emptiness at the center of human subjectivity, the

source of the jouissance that overwhelms human life. The second is the Other of the subject's own fantasy, to which myth lends credibility by providing the representations that give consistency to the Other within a particular civilization. The two are nonetheless intimately related, since the imaginary Other gives a face to the Absent Other of the address, and thereby allows the subject to repress its absence: by fearing its judgments, appealing to it for help, relinquishing his fate to it, or making it the embodiment of justice or goodwill. (*Hostess* 178-79)

If the imaginary Other is represented in Réage's text by the succession of O's various masters, we see that they ultimately fail in the goal of repressing "the Absent Other of the address" because O's experience of jouissance is the force that cannot be contained by any of her masters (*Hostess* 178). The fantasy of the Other who supports her ego fails her because the "Other of seduction" proves to be illusory and transitory, especially as she progresses in her enslavement (*Hostess* 178).

In his *Encore* seminar, Jacques Lacan famously theorizes "that woman is not-whole – there is always something in her that escapes discourse" (33). In this same seminar, as illustrated in his formulas of sexuation, Lacan asserts that the feminine position does not entirely pass through the phallic function and that, therefore, femininity is not fully encompassed by the symbolic order. When Lacan proposes that "there is always something in her that escapes discourse" (33), he suggests that the feminine position is simultaneously marked by what is missing from language and by what is in excess of the signification permitted by language. One who experiences feminine jouissance encounters much trouble in any attempt to articulate this experience, and Lacan's own involuted language on the topic of the ineffability of feminine jouissance stylistically performs this difficulty: "Were there another one,"

but there is no other than phallic jouissance – except the one concerning which woman doesn't breathe a word, perhaps because she doesn't know (*connait*) it, the one that makes her not-whole" (*Encore* 60). While there may appear to be a paradox with respect to writing or talking about something that cannot be spoken of or known, the experience of jouissance cannot be denied. The lack of knowledge or the inability to speak about jouissance is likely due to a defect, or gap, in the symbolic order because it fails to provide a means for discussing an experience that is beyond or outside of the present symbolic order. It is interesting that Lacan cites visual evidence as proof of jouissance; he famously advises skeptics to *look* at Bernini's statue of Saint Teresa:

it's like for Saint Teresa – you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's coming. There's no doubt about it. What is she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it. (*Encore* 76)

In order to say something about jouissance, perhaps a point of entry into a discussion of it lies in visual observation of its effects, and the importance of visual perception, especially of O's body, is paramount throughout the text.

From the outset, an extraordinary amount of attention is paid to her body, from the bathing and cosmetic preparations, which almost acquire the status of religious rites, to the elaborate costumes of "pretty eighteenth century chambermaids" that she and the other women of Roissy wear (6). When O is first whipped, the Roissy masters inform her that the markings on her body count as evidence of the extent of her suffering: "judging the results [of the whipping] not from her screams or tears but from the size and color of the welts they had raised" (12). Her masters claim that the "screams or tears" may be unreliable, but the "welts" on her body are apparently a

more reliable index of her suffering.<sup>68</sup> Sir Stephen, O's second master, similarly tells her "that [she] was infinitely more moving when her body was covered with marks, of whatever kind, if only because these marks made it impossible for her to cheat and immediately proclaimed, the moment they were seen, that anything went as far as she was concerned" (112). According to Sir Stephen, the "marks" serve two purposes: they prevent infidelity, and they speak to her willingness to engage in the most scandalous sexual acts imaginable. In a sense, the traces of the beatings usurp the role of speech, and, unlike speech which can be misleading and deceptive, O's body cannot lie. Anne-Marie, a female "master" associated with Roissy who further educates young women in the art of being slaves, also relies on the testimony of O's body rather than her speech, as demonstrated by her query to O: "But tell me now, how did Sir Stephen prefer using you? I need to know" (149). Upon inspection, it becomes clear that Sir Stephen prefers her "rear" (149), and once again O's body supplants her speech, as Anne-Marie remarks to O: "there was no need for you to tell me" (149). Like Anne-Marie, the reader can learn much from a close analysis of O's body.

In fact, while O listens to René and Sir Stephen discuss her body and how they intend to use it to gratify their desires, O considers her status as an object; moreover, she confesses that her body's signifying functioning is pleasing and comforting to her. Just after Sir Stephen makes her come, O is lying on a table where he discards her, and O reflects on her strange relationship to speech and to her body:

O, still lying motionless on her back, her loins still aflame, was listening, and she had the feeling that by some strange substitution Sir

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<sup>68</sup> In "*Histoire d'O: The Construction of a Female Subject*," Kaja Silverman makes a similar point about the legibility of the beatings: "The signifiers 'trace' and 'mark' are used so frequently in relation to the whipping of O that they become virtually synonymous with that activity" (337). Though I share Silverman's interest in O's body "as a writing surface" (338), I do not read O's case as one of masochism, as Silverman often does: "the marks simultaneously signify O as the masochistic subject who not only receives but wants them" (337).

Stephen was speaking for her, in her place. As though he was somehow in her body and could feel the anxiety, the anguish, and the shame, but also the secret pride and harrowing pleasure that she was feeling, especially when she was alone in a crowd of strangers, of passers-by in the street, or when she got into a bus, when she was at the studio with the models and technicians, and she told herself that any and all of these people she was with, if they should have an accident and have to be laid down on the ground or if a doctor had to be called, would keep their secrets, even if they were unconscious and naked; but not she: her secret did not depend upon her silence alone. (112-113)

In this passage, O, perhaps involuntarily, cedes her agency to Sir Stephen as he speaks for her, and this merging of her will with his alienates her from her body, bringing her a measure of relief from the disruptive force of *jouissance* that eludes her control.

“[T]he secret pride and harrowing pleasure” derive from O’s special status as a slave, which grants her a unique position among other people that she comes in contact with (112), and she is glad that she is not solely responsible for either keeping or revealing her secret. Instead of fearing exposure, O calmly contemplates the possibility of her secret being revealed if she should be stripped naked in front of other people. It is telling that O imagines her body as distinct from her mental activities, and she tacitly agrees with her masters that her body can speak more truthfully than her actual speech.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly enough, the secret remains unspecified, unnamed. But it is suggested that it is a secret which can unveil itself by means other than language.

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<sup>69</sup> Silverman offers a similar reading of this scene in terms of O’s alienation “in and through a discourse which exceeds her – one which speaks for her, in her ‘place’” (320). Silverman’s article provides an excellent analysis of the female body and female subjectivity in relation to discourse. While my argument also addresses these topics, as previously mentioned, my position differs from Silverman’s in that I do not consider O’s case to be strictly one of masochism. See, for instance, pp. 329-330, 337, 340, and 342, of Silverman’s article for a discussion of masochism as a motivating factor in O’s submission to physical and sexual abuse.

In *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan*, Monique David-Ménard succinctly sums up the significance of the hysteric's symptoms: "what is played out in the body takes the place of a discourse that cannot be uttered" (3). O is like the hysteric in that her experience of jouissance is disclosed through her body, not through speech. A fascination with secrets and the hysteric's symptoms is a preoccupation of Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*; Freud defines a "symptomatic act" in the following terms:

those acts which people perform, as we say, automatically, unconsciously, without attending to them, or as if in a moment of distraction. They are actions to which people would like to deny any significance, and which, if questioned about them, they would explain as being indifferent and accidental. Closer observation, however, will show that these actions, about which consciousness knows nothing or wishes to know nothing, in fact gives expression to unconscious thoughts and impulses, and are therefore most valuable and instructive as being manifestations of the unconscious which have been able to come to the surface. (68)

Freud famously likens himself to a detective who uncovers the analysand's secrets by attending to the clues that they invariably offer: "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" (*Dora* 69). Freud offers the example of Dora's playing with her reticule as a symptomatic act disguising while simultaneously disclosing the wish to masturbate. Even if the "secret," the unconscious wish, is not accessible through speech, Freud argues that it can be reached through close observation of the body and behavior, in addition to

other modes of signification that evade repression like, dreams, slips of the tongue, and jokes.

The downplaying of speech as a means of signification and the concomitant privileging of the body suggest that the reader must shift attention to the descriptions and reactions of O's body to understand Réage's project of exploring the writing of *jouissance* on O's body. The insistence on the limitations of language as a mode of signification is also a rejection of what Lacan calls the symbolic order, which is in large part comprised of the register of language. Language inevitably and invariably alienates the subject from his or her own desires by causing them to pass through a discourse which is external to the subject. Willy Apollon's "The Letter of the Body" provides a clear analysis of how language structures the child's world:

The child, then, encounters the symbolic order as a structure of the discourses of others. There are two obvious effects of this enmeshment, two primary cuts bearing on the satisfaction of need and on self-representation. First, the symbolic order encloses the satisfaction of need within the Other's desire and discourse. ... Second, the symbolic order severs the speaking being from self-representation. The primary identification of the subject comes rather out of the capture within the signifiers of the Other's discourse, as well as within the unconscious representations of parental desires. (105)

Réage is interested in circumventing the symbolic order to explore other modes of signification which do not necessarily alienate the subject by placing him or her in the discourse of the Other.

In numerous scenes, O's body is repeatedly shown to be the object of the gaze of other characters, and this narrative scenario invites the reader to imaginatively participate in this gaze as well. Mirrors are one of the most common objects in the

text; for example, when O first arrives at the château, she is placed before “a large mirror [in which] she could see herself, thus open, each time her gaze strayed to the mirror” (7). So, O is also subject to her own “gaze,” and this scene introduces the theme of narcissism, which recurs throughout the text with various images of O staring at her own reflection. The “open[ness]” refers to her genitalia, reinforcing her role as a sex slave for the men at Roissy, where all of her orifices must always be available and accessible to her masters. Whenever O looks in a mirror, what she habitually focuses on is her sexual organs, not a unified body image, and nowhere in the text is there ever a description of O’s face. In contrast to the tremendous amount of attention paid to her body, her face is a blank slate, which symbolizes her lack of an autonomous identity. As has been previously mentioned, the narrator proposes that an unseen character (the Other) may be observing O: “I have no idea how long she remained in the red bedroom, or whether she was really alone, as she surmised, or whether someone was watching her through a peephole camouflaged in the wall” (7). The prospect of constant yet unverifiable surveillance enforces the disciplinary regime of Roissy, which involves physical components, including chains, collars, and corsets (to name a few), as well as psychological methods such as the pervasive gaze and the silence imposed upon the women.<sup>70</sup> The possibility of a covert gaze again stresses O’s vulnerability and her powerlessness because she cannot return the gaze of the Other, which entraps her in the position of object.

As we have seen, O’s body frequently undergoes exacting scrutiny in the form of both visual and verbal assessment, and the experience typically unsettles her, perhaps because it encourages her to further regard herself as an object for the Other. When René introduces O to Sir Stephen, the two discuss “the advantages of her body

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<sup>70</sup> I am obviously drawing on Foucault’s theorization of the effects of the gaze and surveillance as a means of enforcing discipline as discussed in his analysis of Bentham’s *Panopticon*; see p. 201 of *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.



with respect to the demands of theirs” (90), and O feels debased by their conversation because of the “utterly base and contemptible” vocabulary they use in reference to her body (90). Sir Stephen is a brother to René, albeit by ties of affection rather than blood, and he replaces René as O’s master, a move that is prefigured in the second version of the opening scene when the unknown friend essentially usurps René’s role as master by directing René’s preparation of O prior to their arrival at the château. After Sir Stephen becomes O’s master, he likewise introduces her to other men associated with Roissy, and similar feelings of shame wash over her when Sir Stephen discusses her enslavement with these men: “O was once again astonished at the coarseness of his language. But then, how did she expect to be referred to, if not as a whore ...” (166). Although O often professes pride in her enslavement, her reaction to verbal insults, such as the ones above, reveal her sensitivity to the dehumanizing aspects of her enslavement, which shows that she is not totally reduced to the status of passive and stoic object. It is interesting that language emotionally wounds her on a more profound level than the physical torture that she endures, and the stressing of language’s power to hurt O is most likely related to Réage’s project of exposing the subject’s radical alienation in language.

Negative verbal evaluation is one way in which O is debased, and her master’s display of her body as a commodity is another way in which she is degraded. O is taught to view herself as a commodity that can be indefinitely passed from one master to another. On the occasion of her first meeting with Sir Stephen, René treats O as an item on display for a prospective buyer, as he offers her up for examination, “by exposing [O] to [Sir Stephen], by opening her as one opens a horse’s mouth to prove that it is young enough, that Sir Stephen found her beautiful enough or, strictly speaking, suitable enough for him, and vouchsafed to accept her” (81). Later, Sir Stephen takes O to “show” her to Anne-Marie (138), and O’s body is again carefully

tested and probed. O now compares herself to merchandise, as her masters critique her body, “This is how they lift the fish at the market, O was thinking, by the gills, and how they pry open the mouths of horses. She also recalled that the valet Pierre, during her first evening at Roissy had done the same to her after having fastened her in chains” (140). There is certainly no dignity in this anatomical examination, and the mercantile metaphors emphasize her chattel status, as O is exchanged among the members of Roissy. O’s body is constantly being evaluated in terms of its serviceability for the sexual pleasure of her masters, but there is a tension between being degraded by and being exalted by her debasement. Later, O proudly displays the piercings and brandings that proclaim her status as Sir Stephen’s personal property. By enduring various forms of debasement, O bears witness to her lover’s desire for her, and the torture and debasement serve as a way of channeling the force of *jouissance* within her by experiencing it within a set of proscribed rituals.

Once the reader learns of O’s sexual history, what is most striking about her current condition is the dramatic reversal her affair with René marks compared to the dynamics of her previous liaisons. O’s posture of subjection begins with René; before becoming René’s lover, O is in the governing role in her relationships with both men and women. The narrator discusses O’s capitulation to René in terms of capture and bondage, such as “René threw himself at her like a pirate at his prisoner” (91), which may foreshadow the eruption of violence in their relationship. “But her love for René and René’s love for her had stripped her of all her weapons, and instead of providing her with any new proof of her power, had stripped her of those she had previously possessed” (90): the references to “weapons” and a “proof of her power” speak to the aggressive underside of romance and love. The narrator further describes O’s sexual pursuits in terms of a challenge or contest for dominance:

But what she took—or mistook—to be desire was actually nothing more than the thirst for conquest, and neither her tough-guy exterior nor the fact that she had had several lovers—if you could call them lovers—nor her hardness, nor even her courage was of any help to her when she met René. (91)

The narrator asserts that O is not driven by “desire” in the sense of sexual attraction; instead, the cause of her actions is characterized as a “thirst for conquest” (91). Yet, such equivocations and qualifications again suggest that narrative explanations of O’s actions should be regarded with suspicion because straightforward and uncomplicated analysis is so rarely given. However, the prioritizing of the “thirst for conquest” does convey the idea that being in a position of control is more important to O than finding the mutually fulfilling and caring relationship usually thought of as love.

On the romantic battlefield, O is depicted as a ruthless warrior, and she is explicitly coded as masculine through the image of the “tough-guy exterior” and implicitly coded as masculine through her association with stereotypically masculine traits such as “hardness” and “courage” (91). The phrase “if you could call them lovers” implies that only a real lover possesses the power to provoke such radical dependence and devotion in one’s partner (91), and love, or some force that is unleashed through her relationship with René, apparently has the power to transform O from a “femme fatale” into a love slave (90). Yet, an interpretation that posits that love is the factor which accounts for the radical destabilization of the dialectic of domination and submission in O’s sexual relationships is neither satisfactory nor adequate to explain her mystifying behavior and transformation.

Gender roles also play out in interesting ways in regard to the dialectic of domination and submission. In addition to male lovers, O has had multiple female lovers in the past, and she later takes Jacqueline, a glamorous Russian fashion model

and actress whom she photographs, as another lover, although she is acting on the orders of Sir Stephen and René during the course of this affair. As a young woman of twenty, the narrator explains that O relishes acting in the male role in the game of chivalrous courtship, “by doffing her beret, by standing aside to let her pass, and by offering her a hand to help her out of a taxi” (96). By maintaining the dominant male role in conventional courtship rituals, O props up a certain kind of passive femininity that she later embraces when she becomes a love slave. In her interactions with women, O often assumes the leading role: “Probably not for the pursuit itself, however amusing or fascinating it might be, but for the complete sense of freedom she experienced in the act of hunting. She, and she alone, set the rules and directed the proceedings (something she never did with men, or only in a most oblique manner)” (96). In “A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” Freud discusses masculine and feminine roles in love affairs; although it is important to stress that his attribution of masculine and feminine roles should not be assigned to biological sex, his comments nevertheless elucidate O’s behavior in her affairs with women:

What is certainly of greater importance is that in her behaviour towards her love-object she had throughout assumed the masculine part: that is to say, she displayed the humility and the sublime over-estimation of the sexual object so characteristic of the male lover, the renunciation of all narcissistic satisfaction, and the preference for being lover rather than the beloved. She had thus not only chosen a feminine love-object, but had also developed a masculine attitude towards this object. (131)

“The sublime over-estimation of the object” is developed by Lacan in his theorization of sexual difference and his claim that, for the masculine subject, object *a* is “what comes to make up for (*suppléer*) the sexual relationship that does not exist” (*Encore* 63). By propping the other women up as the cause of her desire, O gains a better

understanding of her own position as object *a* for her various lovers, who are in the place of the Other of the fantasy.

In some of her prior relationships with men, we see that O is indeed capable of exercising tyrannous control over her lovers; for instance, she “[strips] naked” in front of a young man who has attempted suicide in his despair over her rejection of him only to cruelly inflame his desire even though she has no intention of gratifying it (91). And so, the assertion that she fails to “set the rules and [direct] the proceedings” with men is not entirely accurate, providing yet another instance of narrative unreliability. After she returns from Roissy, O’s co-workers at the fashion studio notice that her whole demeanor has become more reserved, and her outfits, as Jacqueline remarks, give the impression of being “[v]ery little-girl-like” (60). Due to her girlish clothing, the narrator additionally notes that “O looked like a well-brought-up little girl”, and “she [is] taken for [Sir Stephen’s] daughter, or his niece ...” when they are in public (164). O’s histrionic performance of both male and female gender roles points to the cultural construction of these roles.

Whereas O’s masquerade as a gentleman suitor allows her to act in a more assertive and aggressive manner, the role of slave requires that she feign a hyper-femininity marked by passive and submissive behavior, which, along with her girlish clothing, causes her to appear younger than her actual age. O’s youthful aspect bolsters her dependence on her older master, and the feminine position is mainly marked as one of submissive object throughout this text. In terms of feminist politics, it is obviously very objectionable for the feminine position to be tied so closely to passivity and for feminine sexual desirability to be linked with passivity and vulnerability. The secret society of Roissy with its male privilege and female servitude is, at least in part, an exaggerated microcosm of society at large with its stereotypical codes for the assertive, dominant male and the submissive, docile female.

Even though it often appears that O is acting on the basis of her love for a man, this appearance is undercut by the fact that her affections are transferable and by the fact that we see women acting in similar patterns of dominance and submission in same sex relationships (for example, the young Natalie's pledge of love and devotion to O; or Anne-Marie, the master/mistress of the women at Samoï). O is definitely desirous of being the object of the Other's affections, but the positions of object and Other do not correspond to male and female biological sexual assignments.

Through her sexual encounters with women, O discovers another dimension of her identity as object for the Other by seeing something of herself in these women. On the one hand, O pursues women because such encounters allow her to be in the leading position, but she is also genuinely attracted to the beauty of other women. However, O's fascination with their beauty is most likely a means to an end rather than a wish for a homosexual relationship:

The beauty of other women, which with unfailing generosity she was inclined to find superior to her own, nevertheless reassured her concerning her own beauty, in which she saw, whenever she unexpectedly caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror, a kind of reflection of theirs. The power she acknowledged that her girl friends held over her was at the same time a guarantee of her own power over men. (97-98).

O's admiration of other women's beauty is partly a quest to find her own image, which may be a form of narcissism. When O looks in the mirror, the image she sees reflected is her own as well as that of other women. Toward the end of the novel, O again reflects on her desire for other women in a way that reveals a narcissistic investment: "she was only in love with girls as such, girls in general—the way one can be in love with one's own image ..." (191). O's point of identification is with the

male lover; she wants to see the beauty in other women from the same position that her male lover sees her beauty. If O finds the women's beauty moving and powerful, then, since her own beauty resembles theirs, she too is beautiful and desirable. The apparent narcissism is undermined by the fact that O's motivation lies not in boasting of her own beauty but in assuring herself that others will find her beautiful.

After O's first visit with Anne-Marie, she recalls a childhood memory that conjures up a powerful narcissistic image:

the statue she had seen as a child in the Luxembourg Gardens: a woman whose waist had been similarly constricted and seemed so slim between her full breasts and plump behind—she was leaning over limpid waters, a spring which, like her, was carefully sculptured in marble, looking at her reflection—so slim and frail that she had been afraid the marble waist would snap. (141)

Anne-Marie instructs O to wear an extremely constricting corset, which will refashion O's body to look like the statue. As a child, O remembers sensing something fragile and precarious about the statue; perhaps, through this recollection and comparison, O glimpses a premonition of her own impending fate. Like Narcissus, the female statue stares into the water at her own image, alluding to the enchanting yet fatal attraction of the gaze. The myth of Narcissus teaches that self-love is self-destruction, and, while O does appear to be on the path of self-destruction, the myth of Narcissus does not exactly correspond to her situation. It is not so much a selfish absorption but rather a curiosity to know something about herself that drives O. In *Freud's Papers on Technique*, Lacan proposes that love has a narcissistic foundation: "That's what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (142). If it is true that one seeks a specular manifestation of "one's own ego" in the world of images, then this may help to account for O's concentration

on studying the faces of other women. Lacan's formulation also suggests that love relationships arise in dyadic terms of object and Other, in which a person needs another person to make visible and to acknowledge and thereby participate in the creation of the other person's identity.

O's obsession with women also arises from her fascination with *jouissance*, and through witnessing other women have orgasms, she gains an important point of entry into this phenomenon. O elaborates on the basis of her attraction to women by discussing how emotionally electrified she feels when she makes a woman come:

The pleasure she derived from seeing a girl pant beneath her caresses, seeing her eyes close and the tips of her breasts stiffen beneath her lips and teeth, ... then sigh and moan—was more than she could bear; and if this pleasure was so intense, it was only because it made her constantly aware of the pleasure which she in turn gave when she tightened around whoever was holding her, whenever she sighed and moaned, with this difference, that she could not conceive of being given thus to a girl, the way this girl was given to her, but only to a man. Moreover, it seemed to her that the girls she caressed belonged by right to the man to whom she belonged, and that she was only present by proxy. (191)

The visual nature of the pleasure is once more highlighted with the repetition of the word "seeing," and in an earlier passage, O also fixates on watching the faces of women who are having orgasms: "For O passionately loved to see faces enveloped in that mist which makes them so young and smooth, a timeless youth that does not restore childhood but enlarges the lips, widens the eyes the way make-up does, and renders the iris sparkling and clear" (97). In this same section, O is further described as being "overwhelmed" by "the transfigured face of a girl" (97). Both the long and



brief excerpts quoted above place much emphasis on the details of the body's physical response to sexual stimulation, such as the contractions, sighs, and moans, but *jouissance*, specifically feminine *jouissance*, produces more than just a physical reaction in the body. The reference to "a timeless youth" and "the transfigured face" argues for a mystical and spiritual dimension to the changes induced by *jouissance*.

Just as the other women's beauty helps her to comprehend the influence of her own beauty on men, so too does her ability to appreciate being the giver and receiver of orgasm provide her with a more intimate and nuanced understanding of it. Once O becomes a slave at Roissy, male priority is reinforced because she would only put herself in the position of object for a man and because she understands the women as property, or objects, which belong to a man. O literally performs *jouissance* in the sense of the word's original feudal meaning of enjoying or profiting from something or someone that you do not own.<sup>71</sup> O's derives her own pleasure by watching other women having an orgasm, and so she enjoys through observation of that woman's pleasure. O also labors on behalf of a master (again performing the feudal definition of *jouissance*) by bringing the woman to orgasm for a master; she is "present by proxy" and doing the work of the master (191). O's relationship to her own orgasm is problematic, even traumatic, and this is most obvious in her one act of disobedience, her refusal to masturbate in front of Sir Stephen when he orders her to do so. It is as if her own *jouissance* can also only be experienced by proxy; that is, it must be offered up to the Other.

One way in which O serves René is through his prostitution of her among the other Roissy masters, and this is likened to the way a god treats his creatures: "Thus he would possess her as a god possesses his creatures, whom he lays hold of in the guise of a monster or a bird, of an invisible spirit or a state of ecstasy" (31). In a manner

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<sup>71</sup> See McNulty for an explanation of the etymology and definition of *jouissance*; p.217 of *The Hostess*.

similar to a god's manifestation "in the guise of a monster or bird," René declares that the other masters are "reflections of him" (31), and this claim divorces authority from any single male because it is a quality or abstract principle possessed by or embodied in René that O is ultimately obeying. Behind the positioning of male masters and female slaves in the dialectic of domination and submission, the preponderance of religious imagery intermingled with scenes of sexual excess intimates that *jouissance* may be the driving force which supersedes the two terms in the dialectic. Expounding on the rationale for O's prostitution, the narrator relates that "[René] gave her only to reclaim her immediately, to reclaim her enriched in his eyes, like some common object which had been used for some divine purpose and has thus been consecrated" (31). Prostitution is compared to a religious ritual that transforms O into a more valuable and precious object, and this alchemy occurs through the *jouissance* that flows through the medium of her flesh. René also wants to prostitute O to affirm his ownership of her because "one can only give what belongs to you" (31). Jane Gallop confirms René's definition of ownership in her explanation of the difference between ownership and *jouissance*:

It is the use, the enjoyment, the *jouissance*, which exceeds exchange. This opposition of *jouissance* and possession can refer to a legal meaning of *jouissance*, as having the use of something. Notice the example of usufruct, given in the dictionary under *jouissance*. 'Usufruct' is the right to the *jouissance* but not the ownership of something; in other words, you can use and enjoy it, but you cannot exchange it. (49-50)

O's body again functions as a commodity that is exchanged among men, but the experience of *jouissance* is not tied to any particular man or woman. Ultimately, she

is passed on from master to master, which implies that ownership is also a problematic notion in regard to her status as property.

Part of the reason why O assents to become a slave also derives from the mystical aspect of *jouissance*, and her devotion to her master is often expressed in religious discourse and imagery. For instance, when O is in the Roissy library with the masters, she kneels in an attitude “as nuns are wont to do” (10), suggesting that her sexual degradation is a form of humility before a deity as nuns prostrate themselves in the presence of God. O also conceives of her confinement at Roissy as penance and purification for her god—that is her master—and the extreme portrayal of herself as the lowly sinner and René as the lofty master contributes to the religious imagery. In melodramatic terms that resemble those of unabashed erotica, the narrator describes a scene in which O performs fellatio on René: “O felt that her mouth was beautiful, since her lover condescended to thrust himself into it, since he deigned publicly to offer caresses to it, since, finally, he deigned to discharge in it. She received it as a god is received ...” (19). Few women would speak of oral sex in such exalted terms, and so the use of words like “condescended” and “deigned” is a clear indicator of O’s extreme level of self-debasement.

When O first sees a master at Roissy, he is “dressed in a long purple robe,” and she immediately notices his penis: “It was the sex that O saw first ...” (7). On the same night, O is told that the masters wear capes that expose their penises “for the sake of insolence, so that your eyes will be directed there upon it and nowhere else, so that you may learn that there resides your master, for whom, above all else, your lips are intended” (16). This assertion dislocates authority from any specific man, which is borne out by the substitutability of O’s masters, and the fragmentation of the male body also depersonalizes the master as a specific individual. The insistence on the penis as the “master” is also notable because the penis is the male organ through

which phallic jouissance is experienced. The masters may also be overwhelmed by jouissance despite their position of dominance in the dialectic. The penis as the “master” also invokes the phallus as the master signifier in the symbolic order, suggesting that something greater than sexual indulgence is at stake. The constant availability and accessibility of O’s orifices for her masters and their flaunting of their penises implies that their sexual gratification is a priority, but the anonymity and substitutability among the masters leave open the possibility that they may be subject to someone or something beyond any individual male. O’s religious attitude certainly suggests that she endures the physical trials for something much greater than the sake of bodily pleasure, either hers or her masters. The various masters fulfill the role of imaginary Other, positing a dyadic relationship between O and each master, but the absent Other, associated with the subject’s alienation in language and with the experience of jouissance, is also at stake in these scenarios, as implied in the unnamed but powerful presence in the various scenarios of domination and submission.

Despite its avowed practices of sexual indulgence, Roissy shares some similarities to a convent because the women are cloistered there and devoted to their masters with a fervor that resembles those of members of religious orders. In a convent, nuns engage in many rituals that involve mortification of the flesh to elevate the spirit, and, in the château, O endures many forms of torture to prove her commitment to her master. The masters tell O that she will be whipped “less for our pleasure than for your enlightenment” (16), and they inform her that “this flogging and the chain . . . are intended less to make you suffer, scream, or shed tears than to make you feel, *through* this suffering, that you are not free but fettered, and to teach you that you are totally dedicated to something outside yourself” (17). The body becomes an instrument that enables O to gain knowledge about “something outside of herself,” and yet this “something” is “outside of herself” only in the sense that she cannot

consciously control it and that it does not exclusively originate within her body. The “something” seems to be the phenomenon of *jouissance*, which is simultaneously an experience within the body and also an experience which comes from “something outside yourself” (17). *Jouissance* threatens to override and dissolve the integrity of the body, and the chains anchor the body to this experience and remind O that she is not in control of her body. On the face of it, O tolerates the rigors of Roissy to ensure René’s love for her, but, as a number of points demonstrate, she is actually trying to find some relief from *jouissance*, a far more disruptive energy than her attachment to René.

The master’s goal of instilling in O a devotion “to something outside of [herself]” (Réage 17) is effectively accomplished because O internalizes the discipline she learns at Roissy, as the following scene portraying O gazing at her reflection in her bedroom mirror reveals: “She was no longer wearing either a collar or leather bracelets, and she was alone, her own sole spectator. And yet never had she felt herself more totally committed to a will which was not her own, more totally a slave, and more content to be so” (58). O no longer needs the accoutrement of Roissy to generate the conditions of her enslavement, and, more importantly, she no longer needs her master’s presence to compel her to obey. Although the arrangement of this scene is narcissistic, its effects are not: the spectacle of her body reminds her of her subservience to an external “will which was not her own” (58). While at Roissy, O cedes both control and use of her body to her masters, who attempt to channel the force of *jouissance*, and, by doing so, O gets a reprieve from this experience. When she speaks of the enslaving effect of her love for René, O rejoices in the bonds of his love: “She was no longer free? Yes! thank God, she was no longer free. But she was light, a nymph on clouds, a fish in water, lost in happiness” (91). The paradoxical relation between captivity and freedom results from the fact that O is free in servitude

because someone else assumes (whether or not this assumption is successful is debatable) responsibility for the *jouissance* that she cannot control. Once O forsakes her freedom, she can revel in her captivity, and this is similar to the mental and spiritual release that nuns experience through their dedication to God despite the physical and material restrictions of their lives.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about the religious imagery is the discourse of sin and redemption that permeates the novel, and O repeatedly expresses a desire for redemption, which obviously raises the question of what sin she is guilty of. O initially concedes that there may be “trifling acts” and “thoughts and fleeting temptations” in regard to her desire for others, but she insists that she has not acted on these feelings (92). Yet, O’s testimony is contradicted by Sir Stephen’s assessment of her upon their first meeting:

“You are easy, O,” he said to her. “You love René, but you’re easy. Does René realize that you covet and long for all the men who desire you, that by sending you to Roissy or surrendering you to others he is providing you with a string of alibis to cover your easy virtue?” (83)

Shortly after Sir Stephen’s appraisal, O essentially admits that he is right when she reflects that “[René] was certain that she was guilty, and without really wanting to, René was punishing her for a sin he knew nothing about (since it remained completely internal), although Sir Stephen had immediately detected it: her wantonness” (92-93). O’s sin apparently lies in her attraction to other people and her desire to be “surrender[ed]” to them, despite what appears to be an earnest desire to remain faithful to René in her actions as well as her thoughts. O interprets her harsh handling at Roissy, which includes violent sexual encounters and multiple floggings, as punishment for her “sin,” and the sexual surfeit of Roissy may be understood as an instance of the cure for the disease being an overdose of the cause. However, the

typical pattern of narrative uncertainty regarding O's motivations is particularly evident in the two passages quoted above. O moves from dismissing her peccadilloes as hardly worthy of mention to condemning herself as deserving of severe punishment. Once Sir Stephen puts forward the accusation that René facilitates her sinfulness by indulging her irrepressible promiscuousness, O begins to seriously contemplate this possibility herself: "What if she actually enjoyed her debasement? In that case, the baser she was, the more merciful was René to consent to make O the instrument of his pleasure" (93). Yet, it remains speculative as to whether or not O is actually prompting René to order her beatings since this possibility is framed as a question. Along with O, we see that Sir Stephen is a more discerning master than René, but he is not necessarily the ultimate authority on O's desires. The reader must again study her bodily responses to seek a more authentic or accurate explanation.

In the simplest terms, O's dilemma can be described as a conflict between love and lust, or her mind and her body. The repeated image of O in bondage, beginning with her bound hands during the car ride to the château, develops the idea that something inside of O needs to be controlled, and while it is not explicitly stated, it is very likely that it is *jouissance*, which overruns her body. It is clear that her body, especially the manifestation of her erotic drives, defeats her conscious efforts to control it. On her first morning at Roissy, O moans and cries in pleasure during sex acts with an unknown man in the presence of René, which produces feelings of guilt and anxiety in her: "[O] had moaned beneath the lips of the stranger as never her lover had made her moan, cried out under the impact of a stranger's member as never her lover had made her cry out. She felt debased and guilty. She could not blame [René] if he were to leave her" (30). Through the medium of her body, O ostensibly admits that the other man is a better lover than René, but, since she loves René, she is ashamed to have received such pleasure from another man. O interprets her orgasm as

a sign of her infidelity, and this is why the language used to describe her orgasms reveals that O both resists giving in to her pleasure and conceives of it as a moment of defeat, a triumph of her body over her will: “wrenching from [O] a moan which she could no longer restrain” (40). When René first bestows O upon Sir Stephen, the language used to express her feelings of shame upon climaxing at the hands of Sir Stephen is even stronger: “[O] was vanquished, undone, and humiliated that she had moaned” (77). Instead of orgasm being a blissful release, O generally experiences it as proof of her weakness, and she wishes that she could overcome her body’s submission to her erotic drive.

*Story of O* differs dramatically from the Marquis de Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) in this regard. Whereas Sade celebrates orgasm as liberation from the repressive morals of dominant society and a return to the natural instincts of Mother Nature, Réage presents orgasm, in most contexts, as a more problematic experience of overwhelming *jouissance*, a force that divides the subject between the desire to indulge the erotic drives and the wish to find a limit to the erotic drive, which is closely aligned with the death drive. Sade advocates for complete sexual freedom for women as well as men, and he views love as a serious impediment to this freedom: “it is above all to oppose yourselves [that is, women] to enslavement by any one person, because the outcome of constant love, binding you to him, would be to prevent you from giving yourself to someone else, a cruel selfishness which would soon become fatal to your pleasures” (286). On the hand, Sade’s argument against monogamy partly applies to O’s situation because her love for René does prevent her from indulging her desire for other men and women without René’s express authorization. On the other hand, O finds a certain limit to the drive by submitting to bondage; enslavement is liberating in the sense that it provides some relief from the overwhelming *jouissance* within her.



When O is penetrated by another man at Roissy in the presence of her lover, she does experience physical pleasure, but her emotional reaction is one of guilt and fear, as quoted above, “She felt debased and guilty. She could not blame [René] if he were to leave her” (30). O interprets her guilt in a theological framework, likening herself to “the salt statues of Gomorrah” and proclaiming that “[t]hose who love God, and by Him are abandoned in the dark of night, are guilty, *because they are abandoned*” (92). Natalie, the younger half-sister of Jacqueline, idolizes O in a similar manner to O’s initial extreme dedication to René, and she begs O to beat her rather than to cast her off: “If you had a dog, you’d keep him and take care of him. And even if you don’t want to kiss me but would enjoy beating me, you can beat me. But don’t send me away” (179-180). For both O and Natalie, kisses may be preferable to beatings, but beatings are certainly preferable to abandonment. What’s more, Natalie, like O, compares herself (at least implicitly) to an animal, and by doing so, both women place themselves in subordinate positions to a master in the way that an animal is at the disposal of an owner. Dogs are typically associated with loyalty, which most likely accounts for Natalie’s choice of this animal, but fidelity is a very fraught issue in this text, one that pits the body against the mind and one that foregrounds the question of fidelity to what or whom since the masters are substitutable and impermanent.

The strange and unsettling interchangeability between sex and violence is also borne out in the similar vocabulary used to describe sex and floggings, as well as O’s reactions to both of these events. For example, a master’s penis is described as a “sword of flesh which had so cruelly pierced O at least once” (40), and Sir Stephen’s first sexual act with O is also shown in very aggressive terms of an “inva[sion]”: “he drove into her mouth. . . . O felt the suffocating gag of flesh swell and harden, its slow repeated hammering finally bringing her to tears” (83). The image of the “sword of

flesh” and words like “pierced” and “hammering” deliberately blur the boundary between torture and sex. As noted above, Réage uses the same vocabulary of “moaning” when O is being whipped and when she is having an orgasm (25), and the use of the same utterance suggests that the two apparently different physical actions can induce a similar bodily response in O. However, if *jouissance* is an excess of pleasure that spills over into pain (or vice versa), then it is not surprising to find this correspondence in the terminology. Freud’s essay, “A Child is Being Beaten,” also presents a theoretical framework for understanding the interchangeability between sex and beatings. In his analysis of female children, Freud reports that the second and unconscious phase of the beating fantasy arises from the child’s feelings of guilt for her incestuous love for a parent: “The sense of guilt can discover no punishment more severe than the reversal of this triumph: ‘No, he does not love you, for he is beating you’” (107). Freud then goes on to explain that “[t]his being beaten is now a meeting-place between the sense of guilt and sexual love. *It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for it ...*” (108). While O is not guilty of an incestuous love, she does exhibit prohibited desires for other men and women, and her acceptance of her punishment may also be compensation (or “*the regressive substitute*”) for sex.

When O is staying at Anne-Marie’s, Anne-Marie instructs O to whip another slave, Yvonne, and the narrator relates O’s pleasure in performing this task: “how lovely it was to hear [Yvonne’s] moans and sighs, how lovely too to witness her body soaked with perspiration, and what a pleasure to wrest the moans and sweat from her” (157). Taken out of context, it might be assumed that Yvonne is having sex and coming whereas she is actually being systematically whipped by O. At first, O is hesitant to inflict pain on Yvonne, but she is swiftly “overwhelmed with a terrible feeling of pleasure ...” (157), which again illustrates the instability of the dialectic of

domination and submission. There is no innate essence in a person that relegates him or her to the role of master or slave; rather, one's position in the dialectic is determined by the specific dynamics and circumstances of a particular relationship. The startling mixture of pleasure and pain is common to texts written in the libertine tradition, and despite the tendency to hold the two experiences apart, the body responds in much the same way to these two stimuli, a fact that troubles the dialectic of master and slave.

In addition to the overwhelming force of the erotic drive, the depiction of various physiological functions demonstrates the pressure of biological functions, and the emphasis on O's inability to control these functions provides a justification for the use of physical punishment to discipline her body. When O is at Roissy, she is forced to urinate in front of the valet, Pierre, a rather unnerving incident: "All the while [O] remained there, [Pierre] stood contemplating her, she could see him in the mirrors, and see herself, and was incapable of holding back the water which escaped from her body" (Réage 45). In this room with its mirror-covered walls, O is subject to multiple views of herself, as well as the gaze of Pierre, and so she is constructed as the object of both the Other's gaze and her own. The presence of Pierre provides the perspective of another viewer who witnesses O gaining knowledge of her inability to control her own body. Obviously, the biological need to urinate is of a different order than the erotic drive, but this scene likewise emphasizes to O her failure to have command of her body in a manner that is certainly meant to embarrass her.

Sir Stephen subjects O to a similar scenario when he instructs her to "[c]ress the tips of your breasts," and O "[feels] them stiffen and rise" (79). Later in this same scene, O perceives that Sir Stephen lightly strokes her nipples: "Sir Stephen's right hand, which was holding his cigarette, grazed their tips with the end of his middle finger and, obediently, they stiffened further. ... the way one checks to ascertain

whether a machine is functioning properly” (82). As far as biological reflexes are concerned, O’s body behaves “obediently,” and, on an organic level, some biological processes do function autonomously of conscious thought like a “machine.” This is also true for Sir Stephen, who gets an erection when he gazes longingly at O: “[O] none the less was easily able to see that he was admiring her, and that he desired her” (70). Sir Stephen may possess greater will power than O, as she observes: “O hated herself for her own desire, and loathed Sir Stephen for the self control he was displaying” (80), but he eventually succumbs to his desire when he finally ejaculates in her anus. In the case of both O and Sir Stephen, the organic functioning of the body is pitted against eroticism, and the point of the encounters described above is to test the boundaries between the two.

The modification and disciplining of O’s body is a seemingly endless project that progresses through many stages: the renovation of her wardrobe for the purpose of facilitating access to her sexual organs, the application of makeup and perfume on various erogenous zones of the body, the repeated whippings that leave large welts on her body, the gradual enlargement of her anal cavity by means of “an ebonite shaft” (41), the gradual contraction of her waist by successive corsets, the excruciating piercing of her labia, and the branding of her buttocks. By contrasting the starting and finishing point of O’s makeover, beginning with the surrender of her undergarments and ending with her metamorphosis into a non-human creature, it becomes apparent that the cost of her erotic escapades is to render her into a fantasy object of the Other’s desire, quite possibly at the expense of her own life. Toward the conclusion of the fourth and final section of the novel, “The Owl,” O is again a passenger in a car – this time Sir Stephen is the driver – and she now appears in an even more extreme image of bondage. By this stage of O’s servitude, the transformation that began with the removal of her undergarments culminates in the dramatic reinvention of her body as

an owl, a nocturnal bird of prey. O's owl costume is a mask "composed of tan and tawny feathers whose color blended beautifully with her tan; the cope of feathers almost completely concealed her shoulders, descending half way down her back and, in front, to the nascent curve of her breasts" (193). Aside from the mask, O is completely naked, even to the extent of having her pubic hair removed to bare her genitalia more completely, and she is being lead on a leash to a party hosted by another Roissy member, known as the Commander. The mask conceals O's face, effacing her individual identity and heightening the viewer's attention to her body. Natalie, Jacqueline's younger half-sister who is in love with O, leads O about by a chain "used for dogs" (193), a detail which adds to the picture of O's degradation, and this chain is grotesquely attached to the rings that pierce her labia.

Appearing in the moonlight and being led on a chain by "her black little shadow, Natalie" (197), O causes quite a sensation upon her arrival at the party. The other guests gape at and even touch O, but no one speaks to her—they are fascinated and stunned by her appearance. Without a doubt, there is something eerie and even monstrous about O's appearance as an owl, and this is evident in the guests' reaction to her. None of the guests dare speak to O, which particularly highlights her status as an aesthetic object: "the illusion was so extraordinary that no one thought of questioning her, which would have been the most natural thing to do, as though she were a real owl, deaf to human language and dumb" (197-198). The ability to use a complex system of language is generally recognized as a distinguishing characteristic of humans, and O's perceived inability to speak or comprehend language places her in the realm of the non-human. In order to accept her presence at the party, the guests actually need to disavow her humanity, and this is illustrated by the crass American's discovery that she is not a statue but a person:

There was even one drunken American who, laughing, grabbed her, but when he realized that he had seized a fistful of flesh and the chain which pierced her, he suddenly sobered up, and O saw his face fill with the same expression of horror and contempt that she had seen on the face of the girl who had given her a depilatory; he turned and fled.

(198)<sup>72</sup>

When confronted with the reality of her human body, “a fistful of flesh,” the stereotypically brash American is shocked out of his fantasy of viewing O solely as an erotic mannequin, and the extreme degree of her subjection produces intense emotions of “horror and contempt,” which precipitate his flight from her.

In the *Ethics* seminar, Lacan offers a formulation of sublimation as a phenomenon that raises “an object ... to the dignity of the Thing” (112). O has been in the object position in relation to her various masters, but her dramatic transformation in this scene, to the extent that she no longer even seems human, suggests that the phenomenon of sublimation is at play. The American’s flight from her also suggests that he is in the presence of the Thing because a crucial element of the Thing is the subject’s proximity to it. If the Thing, or *das Ding*, is “something *entfremdet*, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me,” as Lacan explains Freud’s theorization of *das Ding* in the *Ethics* seminar (71), then one can approach it only cautiously and at a certain distance before being overwhelmed by it.

For another young couple, O is a teaching tool, simply a body without subjectivity, and the young girl touches O’s body at the behest of her lover: “they used

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<sup>72</sup> When O visits the beauty parlor for her depilatory, the beautician is horrified by the lashes on O’s body, and O tries to comfort the beautician by “explain[ing] to her that this wax-type depilatory, a method in which the wax is applied and allowed to harden, then suddenly removed, taking the hair with it—was no more painful than being struck with the riding crop” (194). This is an odd juxtaposition, which collapses the supposedly normal world with its common grooming practice and the libertine world with its violent practices. The disconcerting effect is to call into question the accepted distance between these two worlds.

her in this way as a model, or the subject of a demonstration, not once did anyone ever speak to her directly. Was she then of stone or wax, or rather some creature from another world, and did they think it pointless to speak to her? Or didn't they dare?" (198-199). The rhetorical questions point to the ambiguity of her status, and the final question suggests an element of dread in her bearing. O is clearly there for the use and enjoyment of the other guests at the party, and she functions on a number of levels, namely the instructive, aesthetic, and erotic. The theatricality of O's costume and presentation is similar to a tableau vivant, and she previously remarks on "this air of an Egyptian statue which this mask lent her ..." (195). The elevation of her body into an artwork is evidence of the crucial component of fantasy in erotic life, but such an elevation leads to an erasure of agency, which, if it can be said that she has a goal, it seems likely that her goal is just this. And we see this erasure most dramatically marked by her apparent loss of speech, which is the culmination of her problematic relationship to language and to agency.

While it does appear that O lacks any control or agency in the final scene, this appearance is somewhat deceptive because Natalie has actually been promised to O, as O's reflections on this topic reveal,

If Natalie had not been declared off-limits to her, [O] would have taken Natalie, and the only reason she had not violated the restriction was her certainty that Natalie would be given to her at Roissy in a few weeks' time, and that, some time previously, Natalie would be handed over in her presence, by her, and thanks to her. (190-91)

At Roissy, O will assume the role of instructing Natalie, and she will essentially prostitute Natalie by "hand[ing] [her] over" to a Roissy member (190). Since an owl is a bird of prey, O doubtless has the aggressive hunting instincts of such birds, and her hunting prowess is explicitly praised just before she tries on the various masks:

“[O] was apt at hunting, a naturally trained bird of prey who would beat the game and always bring it back to the hunter” (192). Despite her own submission, O possesses the power to lure and trap others, so long as she performs this service for her master. O is initially attempting to capture Jacqueline for René and Sir Stephen, but Natalie proves to be an easier prey and becomes a substitute for her half-sister because she is eager to join the ranks of the enslaved women of Roissy. After leading O to a bench, Natalie sits “on the ground to the left of [O’s] feet” (197), and this positioning of their bodies symbolizes Natalie’s servitude to O. The ambivalent relationship between the two women once again leaves open the question of who is dominant and who is submissive, or, at least, it indicates fluidity between the two positions.

Sir Stephen is presumably still O’s master, but he now entrusts O to the Commander’s care, blurring the picture of who is in control once again. This is illustrated when Sir Stephen tells O “‘you’ll be an owl for the Commander’” (193), explaining that this performance is staged for another master. Just as authority over O shifts in the first scene from René to the unknown friend, here control over O is similarly transacted between two men. O learns that Sir Stephen agrees “to lend her to [the Commander] the following week” (190), a prospect which must distress O, since she finds his presence intimidating:

[The Commander] circled [O], studying her breasts, her thighs, her hindquarters, inspecting her in detail but offering no comment, and this careful scrutiny and the presence of this gigantic body so close to her so overwhelmed O that she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to run away or, on the contrary, have him throw her down and crush her. (189)

The Commander is introduced as “an enormous man, a giant of a creature with a cigarette between his lips, his head shaved and his vast belly swelling beneath his open shirt and cloth trousers ...” (188), his massive bodily presence signifies his power.



The “vast belly swelling beneath his open shirt and cloth trousers” sounds like an indirect allusion to his sexual potency. The daunting size of the Commander and his menacing presence probably influence O’s instinct to flee from him. Alternatively, O may actually want him to be killed by him—if he were to “throw her down and crush her” (189).

The reader begins to suspect that the Commander is about to become O’s new master when Sir Stephen grants the Commander’s wish that O come as an owl to his party. O’s transfer from René to Sir Stephen begins when René loans O to Sir Stephen, and this model of transacting ownership of O looks as if it is about to happen again. The names of O’s masters reveal a hierarchy among them: René is known by his first name only, Sir Stephen has a title that speaks to his aristocratic privilege, and lastly, the Commander is known by a designation that literally affirms his powerful and domineering role. The portrayal of increasingly potent masters raises this question: Who is the master behind the Commander? That is, we might reasonably wonder whether or not there is a limit to the transacting of O’s ownership among various masters. We might also speculate as to what would serve as proof of O’s submission and therefore the sign of an effective master. Would her physical death be the necessary proof of her surrender of both her will and her body?

The suspicion that death is indeed the ultimate proof of O’s submission is tentatively confirmed by the two editorial comments (which were previously discussed) inserted after the conclusion of the proper boundaries of the narrative. The unstable and provisional positions of domination and submission that have characterized O’s relationships will finally come to a stop with her death. Throughout the text, Réage represents O’s body as a writing tablet on which *jouissance* erupts in response to both pleasure and pain. By repeatedly presenting the feminine position as that of an object, Réage shows the vulnerability of women to *jouissance* by tracing O’s

futile attempts to control this force and by showing the dissolution of her subjectivity through the transformation of her body into a pure object. *Story of O* is an exploration of what happens to a woman when she surrenders to the workings of jouissance, and, in this novel, we see that bondage and torture provide some relief from overwhelming jouissance because these experiences allow O to cede control of her body to someone else. The emphasis on O's body, either through visual observation and evaluation of it or through its ability to speak in her place, arises from skepticism about language's role in expressing and describing experiences. The destabilization of narrative authority is directly linked to the privileged status of O's body in which the reader, as well as other characters, can observe and learn certain things about her that resist signification in language. By pointing to the limits of the representational abilities of language, Réage's novel exposes some of the gaps in the current symbolic order through her portrait of the writing of jouissance on O's body and through her depiction of O as a willing captive who revels in both the pain and the bliss of her servitude.

## CODA

### Eroticism and Slavery

In his introduction to *Story of O*, “Happiness in Slavery,” Jean Paulhan draws an analogy between Réage’s erotic novel and “an apologia for slavery,” an apocryphal document supposedly authored by an Anabaptist minister on behalf of recently emancipated but still oppressed blacks living in Barbados (xxii). After the abolishment of slavery in the British West Indies in 1833, Great Britain instituted an apprenticeship program for the former slaves in Barbados that essentially perpetuated their state of servitude. Although he acknowledges the harsh conditions of the apprenticeship program, which could certainly have served as the basis of a revolt by former slaves against their masters, Paulhan makes the outrageous claim that the former slaves asked their master “to take them back into bondage” (xxi) because “[they] were in love with their master, [and] they could not bear to be without him” (xxxvi). Paulhan imagines that O accepts her servitude because she too cannot bear to be without her master; he argues that “[l]ove implies dependence” (xxxii). Paulhan’s comparison between O and the former slaves of Barbados is especially inflammatory given the historical context of 1954. John Culbert nicely sums up the nature of Paulhan’s introduction: “Published in 1954, at the height of the decolonization movement, Paulhan’s essay is at least as scandalous as the text it introduces” (95). Two examples of the decolonization movement affecting France in this period are the Algerian War of Independence, which began in 1954, and the 1947 uprising in Madagascar, which helped lead to some reforms mandated by the Overseas Territories Law of 1956.

It is telling that Paulhan uses the example of a British colony rather than a French colony; it is as if he wants to distance France from the problems associated with empire by displacing the problem onto the British West Indies. Arguably, the most famous slave revolution, the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, occurred against French rule in Haiti (formerly known as the French colony of Saint-Domingue). Réage alludes to the period of the Haitian Revolution through her descriptions of the gowns that resemble those of “pretty eighteenth century chambermaids” (6), which the enslaved women of Roissy wear. A physical reminder of the colonies is present in the figure of Sir Stephen’s house servant, who is described as “an elderly mulatto servant” (89), and O confesses to Sir Stephen that Norah, his servant, “fright[ens] her” (137). Sir Stephen validates O’s fears: ““When Anne-Marie is finished with you, I’ll give you genuine reasons for being afraid of Norah”” (137). Norah is later assigned the duty of whipping O when Sir Stephen is unable to do so himself. The fact that Norah is partially of African descent suggests a possible connection to the French colonies, and it seems significant that she is assigned the duty of whipping O, as if her beating of O is coded representation of the movement for decolonization.

In her study of Haiti, Joan Dayan argues that there is a strong connection between the libertine world depicted in Sade’s works and the Black Code, or *Code Noir*. As Dayan argues “[t]he one living model for *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* was slavery in the French Antilles, a fact ignored by all critics of Sade. It is no accident that Sade’s introduction begins with ‘the reign of Louis XIV,’ who promulgated the Black Code for the slave owners of the French Antilles” (212). Dayan describes the Black Code as “sixty articles that take us into a chilling series of qualifications: prohibitions that permit, limitations that invite excess, and a king’s grandiloquence that ensures divestment” (203). Dayan convincingly makes the case

for the Black Code as a source for Sade's fiction, showing how the reality of slavery shared much in common with the excesses and abuses of Sade's fiction.

The instruments and technologies of torture and bondage depicted in the libertine world of *Story of O* have a historical model found in the institution of slavery. Although O's conditions of servitude as compared to those of a real slave like Harriet Jacobs are vastly different, asymmetrical power relations and physical and sexual abuse play a dominant role in each case of servitude. Unlike O, Jacobs never consents to her servitude; Jacobs desires legal and personal freedom whereas O desires a limit to her experience of *jouissance*. Despite the differences in their goals and motivations, the comparison between the two is instructive because it brings historical and psychoanalytic models into dialogue. The sadistic behavior at the center of the institution of slavery forces the most challenging questions about the ethical treatment of the other at the level of the imaginary; that is, at the level of intersubjective relations. Dayan asserts that "[Sade] revealed the truth at the heart of the traffic in slaves: not only economic gain, but the tempting and pleasurable reduction of human into thing" (212). The collision of erotic and ethical matters in the captivity literature examined in this study suggests the need for consideration of the human psyche in political, as well as personal, affairs.

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