



Kent Academic Repository

Rousselot, Elodie (2004) *Re-writing women into Canadian history: Margaret Atwood and Anne Hebert*. Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, University of Kent.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/94621/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.22024/UniKent/01.02.94621>

This document version

UNSPECIFIED

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

Additional information

This thesis has been digitised by EThOS, the British Library digitisation service, for purposes of preservation and dissemination. It was uploaded to KAR on 25 April 2022 in order to hold its content and record within University of Kent systems. It is available Open Access using a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivatives (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) licence so that the thesis and its author, can benefit from opportunities for increased readership and citation. This was done in line with University of Kent policies (<https://www.kent.ac.uk/is/strategy/docs/Kent%20Open%20Access%20policy.pdf>). If you ...

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

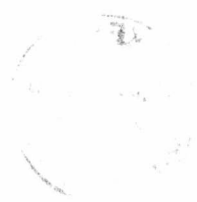
Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

***Re-Writing Women into Canadian History:
Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert***

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD in Postcolonial Studies

Elodie Rousselot



University of Kent

2004



F185593

For Mamie
with love

**‘History is a set of lies
agreed upon.’**

(Napoleon Bonaparte, 1769-1821)

Summary of Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	v
<i>Abstract</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Recent Canadian Historiography	21
Chapter 2: Re-Interpreting Canada's Past in Margaret Atwood's <i>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</i>	46
Chapter 3: Re-Defining Women's Historical Space in Margaret Atwood's <i>Alias Grace</i>	87
Chapter 4: Re-Interpreting Quebec's Past in Anne Hébert's <i>Kamouraska</i>	123
Chapter 5: Re-Writing Women's Destinies in Anne Hébert's <i>La Cage</i> and <i>L'Île de la Demoiselle</i>	162
Chapter 6: <i>Le Premier jardin</i>, or Anne Hébert's Return to the Origins of Quebec's 'Herstory'	188
Conclusion	214
Bibliography	222

List of Illustrations

Figure 1:	Cover illustration of the 1970 edition of <i>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</i>	61
Figure 2:	Illustration introducing Journal I, 1970 edition of <i>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</i>	62
Figure 3:	Cover illustration of the 1997 Virago edition of <i>Alias Grace</i>	115
Figure 4:	‘Head of a Girl in a Green Dress’ (Elizabeth Siddal) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1850-65)	115
Figure 5:	Cover illustration of the 1996 Bantam Dell edition of <i>Alias Grace</i>	115
Figure 6:	Cover illustration of the 1997 Doubleday (US) edition of <i>Alias Grace</i>	115
Figure 7:	Cover illustration of the 1997 Doubleday edition of <i>Alias Grace</i>	115
Figure 8:	‘The Lady of Shalott’ by Elizabeth Siddal (1853)	118
Figure 9:	‘The Lady of Shalott’ by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1857)	118
Figure 10:	Bronze of <i>la Corriveau</i> by Alfred Laliberté, Musée du Québec, Quebec City	163
Figure 11:	Tobacco Cutter (<i>La Corriveau</i> in a Cage), Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa (Nineteenth century, wrought iron and wood)	163
Figure 12:	Tobacco Cutter (<i>La Corriveau</i> in a Cage), Detail of the figurine on the hinge which probably represents <i>la Corriveau</i> in a cage	163
Figure 13:	Illustration by Henri Julien, from Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé’s novel <i>Les Anciens Canadiens</i> (Quebec City, 1863)	167

Abstract

This thesis focuses on two twentieth-century Canadian female authors of distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds: the Ontarian Margaret Atwood, and the Québécoise Anne Hébert, and seeks to address the central role they give to Canadian history, and to actual Canadian historical figures, in their fictional writings. This will provide a means of assessing the ways in which each author attempts to 're-write' Canadian history and to create a specifically female historical space in which traditionally oppressed female figures are given an opportunity to make themselves heard.

Because of the importance given to history and to types of historical narratives in the works selected, it seems relevant to begin with a brief historical outline of Canada and Quebec, as well as with an overview of the current historiographical debates in both: this will be the object of Chapter One. Chapter Two will examine Margaret Atwood's 1970 poem cycle *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, where the poet explores the issues of alienation and displacement she associates with the pioneering experience of the nineteenth-century female settler. Atwood would later re-visit the writings of Susanna Moodie, as will be shown in *Grace*, Atwood's unpublished play, while Chapter Two ends with the study of two poems and a short story in which Atwood also finds inspiration in the life stories of female characters from the past. Chapter Three will be dedicated to the study of Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace*, and will illustrate the ways in which the narrative adopts a 'limited identities' approach to the re-writing of the life of a nineteenth-century handmaid accused of murder. Chapter Four will be concerned with the examination of Anne Hébert's 1970 novel *Kamouraska*, in which notions of historical narratives and private past will be challenged. Chapter Five will explore Hébert's two plays *La Cage* and *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, published jointly in 1990, and will address the author's attempt to re-interpret Quebec's history and to alter Quebecois women's destinies. Finally, Chapter Six will examine Hébert's 1988 novel *Le Premier jardin* and assess the ways in which the author manages to establish a Quebecois 'herstory'.

Acknowledgements

My first words of thanks go to Professor Lyn Innes, for having been such a fantastic supervisor, and without whom, in many ways, this thesis would have never seen the light of day. I am particularly grateful to Professor Innes for her trust, guidance, and kindness, and generally for making my PhD such an enjoyable experience.

Essential research for this project, including several trips to Canada, was made possible thanks to a number of grants and awards: I would like to thank the International Council for Canadian Studies for its very generous scholarship, awarded to me through the British Association for Canadian Studies; I am also especially grateful to the Délégation générale du Québec in London for having awarded me the Prix du Québec, and I wish to thank the Université de Montréal as well for their Supplementary Scholarship. Finally, funding was also received through the Colyer-Fergusson Award, from the Kent Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, and for this too I am extremely grateful.

Many people along the way have been of tremendous help in making the research for this thesis possible, and I would like to thank in particular Christiane Bisson, from the Centre Anne-Hébert at the Université de Sherbrooke, for her great generosity and kindness during my stay at the Centre, and for her essential help in getting hold of out of print material for me; I am also very thankful to Professor Micheline Cambron and to Karine Cellard from the Centre d'Études québécoises of the Université de Montréal for making me feel so welcome, and for making so much crucial material available to me.

The long and 'painful' process that doing a PhD usually is was turned into a truly stimulating and enjoyable experience thanks to the great times spent with many good friends throughout my years in Canterbury; I am thinking in particular of Paraic, Emma & Alan, Jennifer, Kaori & Ben, Matt, Stefania & Steve, Wei-Hung, Stephen Kelly, Shané & Geo, Pamela, Paul & Finola, Antony, Carmen, Fiona & Graham, Jo, Jérôme, Paul R., Angela & Pete, Rana, and Maggie. Some of these have been kind enough to provide much appreciated help with the proofreading of this thesis, for which I am extremely grateful too.

A very big thank you is also due to Gene for his help, patience, support, advice and understanding in the last few years, and for being there at times when it seemed it was all too much for me. Above all, I am particularly grateful to Gene for always believing that ‘it would all happen in the end’, and now that I am finally there, I can truly appreciate how much his trust and confidence has meant to me.

Last but not least, a big word of thanks is also due to my family for all their encouragement, and for making the realisation of this project possible. This thesis would have never happened without the help of Mamie and Papa, and without the support of Mam, Alice, Patrick and Robert.

Introduction

English- and French-Canadian Literature: 'Two Solitudes'?

This thesis began with the observation that, recurrently, Anglophone and Francophone Canadian literature have been perceived as two separate entities, one entity often examined with little or no reference to the other. One notices for instance W.J. Keith's work *Canadian Literature in English* (1985), in the introduction to which he claims: 'the reader (especially, perhaps, the non-Canadian reader) is likely to be struck by the absence in the foregoing discussion of any detailed consideration of French-Canadian or Québécois literature. Surely, it will be said, the interrelations between the writing in Canada's two official languages must have been deep and far-reaching. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.'¹ Keith acknowledges the 'few comparative studies [which] have recently been attempted' in literary criticism, but re-asserts his belief that '[a]t the present time, English- and French-Canadian writing are best discussed separately.'² Such an attitude is well illustrated by the title of Hugh MacLennan's novel about French Canada: *Two Solitudes*, a reference to poet Rainer Maria Rilke's expression which has been taken out of its original context and generally understood to express the state of affairs between English and French Canada in terms of political situations, but also culture and, by extension, literature.³

Margaret Atwood herself, in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) essentially examines Anglo-Canadian writing, while confining the study of French-Canadian literature to a separate chapter within her book. She notices that for the 'French teacher teaching Canadian literature' there ought to be 'a book written in French, describing more of the key patterns in Québec literature, and with a single chapter on "English" Canada parallel to this one.'⁴ In Atwood's more recent *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), the author confesses that she '[has] not dealt with works written

¹ W.J. Keith, *Canadian Literature in English* (Longman Literature in English Series, New York, 1985), pp. 6-7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ See Rainer Maria Rilke's letter to Mr Kappus, May 14, 1904: 'Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect, and touch, and greet each other.' Keith points out however that 'the narrower conception expressed in [MacLennan's] title itself has proved a more accurate description of the socio-political realities' between English and French Canada. W.J. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1996), p. 217.

in French', in part due to 'the political ambiguities involved'.⁵ Moreover, Northrop Frye, in his 'Conclusion' to the *Literary History of Canada* edited by Carl F. Klinck (1965), noticed that 'Canada has two languages and two literatures, and every statement made in a book like [the *Literary History of Canada*] about "Canadian literature" employs the figure of speech known as synecdoche, putting a part for the whole. Every such statement implies a parallel or contrasting statement about French-Canadian literature.'⁶

In French Canada, a similar view has also dominated literary critical discussions, and Réjean Beaudoin notices that the change of appellation from 'French-Canadian literature' to 'Quebecois literature' expresses French Canada's strong resistance to the inclusion in an all-encompassing notion of 'Canadian literature', and an emphasis upon its difference.⁷ Works such as Pierre Nepveu's *L'Écologie du réel: Mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine* (1988), Mary Jean Green's article 'The Quebec Novel Today: Multiple Perspectives' (1994), and her more recent work *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* (2001), all offer examinations of the literature produced in Quebec, and study it separately from any inclusion into a larger 'pan-Canadian' body of work.

However, this perception of French- and English-Canadian literatures as two distinct entities has begun to change recently, and given way to studies where authors from both sides of the 'divide' are discussed in separate essays published in the same collection. For example, *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays* (1990), edited by Arnold E. Davidson, gathers essays on various aspects of English- and French-Canadian literature, although these are organised in two separate sections, with a distinct bibliographic guide for each. More recently, *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities/ Littératures canadiennes et identités postcoloniales* (2002), edited by Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi, follows a similar structure, in spite of the inclusion of essays in both French and English, and of one essay dealing simultaneously with the study of Francophone and Anglophone authors.⁸ On the other hand, Marie Carrière's *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics* (2002) examines a selection of French- and

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p. 11.

⁶ Northrop Frye, 'Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*', *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1971), pp. 216-17.

⁷ Réjean Beaudoin, 'Comparer les littératures canadiennes, pour quoi faire?', *Québec français* (n° 117, 2000), p. 68.

⁸ See Marie-Linda Lord, 'L'Épreuve de la marge face à l'Autre: Les États-Unis dans les romans d'Antonine Maillet et de David Adams Richards', *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities/ Littératures canadiennes et identités postcoloniales*, edited by Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi (Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes – Peter Lang, Brussels, 2002), pp. 61-78.

English-Canadian female writers, and offers a study of the ways in which these authors 'write in the feminine', and of the particular authorial intentions at the heart of their works, without resorting to an analysis organised along the lines of a linguistic or cultural divide. Marie Carrière notices that 'although there are notable (but too few) comparative studies of writing in the feminine in the form of articles and collected essays (which, individually, often deal with either one or the other cultural context [of French and English Canada]), a comparative study – full-fledged and volume-length – is timely and warranted.'⁹ The works aforementioned are by no means an exhaustive list of the works of literary criticism in Canadian literature, but only attempt to give an illustrative sample of the critical attitudes most frequently encountered in the field.

The perspective of Marie Carrière's study thus stands out and has affinities to a well-known approach to the study of Canada's literature(s), 'comparatism'. The latter has often triggered the suspicion of critics on both sides of the divide, among whom is E.D. Blodgett, who points out in his *Configuration: Essays on the Canadian Literatures* (1982) that the comparative project often stems from the belief that 'Canadian literatures' are 'sisters' because issued from the same country, and from the concern that their distinct literary productions could end up developing two conflicting national identities. Blodgett denounces this attitude, and asserts that 'a model that implies that the two literatures are related by reason of the fact that they are the literatures of one country [...] is a political assumption that is not shared everywhere in the country', while asserting that the plural form of the word 'literatures' in his title refers to a multiplicity, and not binarity, of languages and cultures in Canada.¹⁰ Moreover, Réjean Beaudoin notices that Anglo-Canadian critics often attempt to find links between Anglo- and Franco-Canadian works, so as to emphasise the notion that Québécois authors belong, nevertheless, to a wider 'Canadian literary imagination'.¹¹

It is not the project of this thesis to establish an unjustified rapprochement between the literatures of Canada and Quebec, or to adopt either of the agendas aforementioned. The present study rather aims to explore the recurrence of patterns, motifs, and issues raised in the works of two twentieth-century Canadian female authors of distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds: the Ontarian Margaret Atwood, and the Québécoise Anne Hébert. The notion of shared experience, rather than shared nationality, will be key to the critical discussion of

⁹ Marie Carrière, *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁰ Réjean Beaudoin, 'Axes de comparaison entre deux littératures', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 24, n° 3, 1999), p. 487, quoting from E.D. Blodgett, *Configuration: Essays on the Canadian Literatures* (ECW Press, Toronto, 1982), p. 7.

these authors' work, where the imaginative space defined by issues of gender representation, postcolonial identity, and the importance of the past will offer a template within which a selection of works by each author will be examined. Besides, the study of the recurrence of patterns, motifs, and issues in both writers' work will also allow us to appreciate their particularities as well as their similarities. It is important to point out that although the two chosen authors have achieved canonical status in Canada and international literary recognition, they are not meant to represent the whole body of literature produced, respectively, in English Canada and in Quebec today; nor are the observations which will be made in relation to their work applicable to the whole body of Canadian writing. Atwood and Hébert will be studied on their own terms, and not as representatives of their national literature.

However, this thesis will focus on one particular aspect of Atwood's and Hébert's poetic, dramatic and novelistic production, namely, the central role they give to Canadian history, and to actual Canadian historical figures, which will allow us to consider in what ways each attempts to 're-write' Canadian history, and to what degree each manages to create a specifically female historical space in which traditionally oppressed female figures are given an opportunity to make themselves heard. The research for this thesis has included the study of unpublished manuscripts, rare secondary material, audio-tapes, video films, personal and archival documents, all linked to the writings of Atwood and Hébert. Such research was made possible by various grants which have allowed me to visit the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, the Centre Anne-Hébert at the University of Sherbrooke, and the Centre d'Études québécoises at the University of Montreal. Access to these libraries and to documents which have received little critical attention in the past have permitted the development of an original interpretation of Atwood's and Hébert's work, and of a new vision of their relationship to Canadian and Quebecois history.

There have been some comparative studies involving the work of Atwood and Hébert. The poetry of both authors has been compared by Lorraine Weir in her article "'Fauna of Mirrors': The Poetry of Hébert and Atwood' (1979), in which the critic examines the recurrent use of the image of the 'mirror' in both poets' work, to express the entrapment of the female self brought about by the 'reflective' function of the mirror.¹² Barbara Godard's article 'My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert' (1983)

¹¹ Réjean Beaudoin, 'Comparer les littératures canadiennes, pour quoi faire?', *Op. Cit.*, p. 68.

¹² Lorraine Weir, "'Fauna of Mirrors': The Poetry of Hébert and Atwood', *Ariel* (Vol. 10, n° 3, 1979), pp. 99-113.

explores Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, and addresses the fragmentation of the self and the multiplicity of women's roles and beings in the context of a patriarchal society, while pointing out the subversive potential of that multiplicity.¹³ Moreover, Georges Desmeules's article 'Anne Hébert et Margaret Atwood: Une seule et même solitude' (2000) uses Hugh MacLennan's title to better counteract the claim that two distinct societies coexist in Canada. Desmeules shows how Canadian and Quebecois literature often meet around similar and essential issues: he gives the example of the critique of women's status in men's society as expressed in Hébert's *Les Enfants du sabbat* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.¹⁴ Although such themes and issues will be raised in the main discussion of this thesis, these articles either deal with works which will not receive detailed study, or offer a different critical approach.

However, Virginia Harger-Grinling and Tony Chadwick's article 'Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: Individuals in History' (2000) points to issues relating to the complex interplay between the social and the personal historical spheres, the uniqueness of the individual, and the suffocating influence of a (patriarchal) society, which will also be addressed in this thesis's discussion of the same novels. Yet, I question the critics' view that whereas in *Alias Grace* the social sphere dominates over the personal, in *Kamouraska* the focus on the 'fantasmatic world' of the heroine means that the personal sphere takes over the social. Harger-Grinling and Chadwick reach the conclusion that, at the end of *Kamouraska*, 'one is no closer to understanding the motivations for [Elisabeth's] actions', as these motivations belong to the 'secret, psychological' sphere of her experience.¹⁵ The present thesis will offer a different reading of these texts, showing that the reasons behind Elisabeth's actions are indeed vividly depicted through the description of the impact that the realm of the political and social has on her personal existence. In turn, it will also be shown how in both novels the domain of the private does sustain an understanding of larger historical and political events. My research suggests that these are the only instances in which the works of Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert have been compared. In the context of the present study, it is important to note that Margaret Atwood recognised Anne Hébert as one of the female poets having marked her and influenced her poetical consciousness during her

¹³ Barbara Godard, 'My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert', *Essays on Canadian Writing* (n° 26, 1983), pp. 13-44.

¹⁴ Georges Desmeules, 'Anne Hébert et Margaret Atwood: Une seule et même solitude', *Québec français* (n° 117, 2000), pp. 74-76.

¹⁵ Virginia Harger-Grinling and Tony Chadwick, 'Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: Individuals in History', *Études canadiennes/ Canadian Studies* (n° 49, 2000), p. 56.

formative years. In an interview, she cited Anne Hébert as one of 'the women whose work I read and admire'.¹⁶

This introduction proposes to give a brief overview of the life and literary career of, respectively, Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert, while acknowledging the tropes and issues in their writings which have received critical attention in the past. We will then move on to an outline of the tradition of the historical novel in English- and French-Canadian literature, as it seems important to locate both authors' work within the literary framework of historical fiction, so as to better appreciate the appropriation and use each writer makes of it. It will also be relevant to mention the tradition of women's writing in Anglo- and French-Canadian literature, in order to see where each author stands in relation to that body of work. Finally, we will end with a brief chapter-by-chapter outline of the content of this thesis.

Margaret Atwood, Life and Work

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, and grew up in Northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto, and her master's degree from Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The daughter of a forest entomologist, Atwood spent a large part of her childhood in the Canadian wilderness, and the memories of these experiences have influenced her literary imagination on many occasions throughout her career. She has published eleven novels, six collections of short prose and short stories, and eleven books of poetry. Atwood has won many literary awards, both at home and abroad, including: the Governor General's Award in 1966 and 1986; the Canadian Booksellers' Association Award in 1977; the Order of Ontario and the Centennial Medal, Harvard University, in 1990; the *Sunday Times* Award for Literary Excellence in the United Kingdom in 1994; the Canadian Giller Prize and the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit in 1996; and finally the Booker Prize in 2000. Atwood has also received many honorary titles, and became a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1981, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1987, and a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France in 1994. She currently lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson and their daughter.

Her work has been very diverse, but some themes and preoccupations have been recurrent, such as a fascination with the Canadian wilderness, a concern with women's place

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, Interview with Karla Hammond, 'Defying Distinctions', in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, edited by Earl G. Ingersoll (Ontario Review Press, New York, 1990), p. 101.

in society and the use of 'negative' female stereotypes as a way to empower women's causes, Canada's postcolonial status and the ways in which this has affected its art and culture in the past, and finally, the importance of history in Canada's process of nation formation. Many readings of Atwood's work have emphasised the role she gives to the natural landscape, and the degree to which, for Atwood, Nature becomes the means through which one's sense of self and identity is questioned and re-defined. Her poem sequence *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and her novel *Surfacing* (1972) have often been hailed as the best illustrations of this theme. More recently, the collection of short stories *Wilderness Tips* (1991), and to a certain degree the novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), have offered revised perspectives of the role of the wilderness by mingling a postmodern awareness of the author's own role in celebrating and establishing the importance of the Canadian landscape, and of the impact her previous works have had on the perception of the latter. Atwood thus shows an ironical re-visiting of her earlier topic and a vision of Nature informed by contemporary concerns with pollution and ecological disasters in *Wilderness Tips*, while she projects her vision into the future, in a post-apocalyptic setting of bacterial warfare in *Oryx and Crake*. Chapter Two of this thesis will explore these themes in relation to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and examine the effects which, in Atwood's poetic vision, the Canadian wilderness had on the consciousness of the nineteenth-century female pioneer.

Women's (unequal) social status, and the relationships between men and women have also been concerns for the author in many of her works, including *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). In all these novels, in one way or another, woman's place in society and the ways in which issues of gender, class and nationality affect the latter are addressed, while the oppressive dictates of a patriarchal society restricting and conditioning women's roles are denounced. This is particularly visible in *The Edible Woman* and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also in *Alias Grace*, which will be studied in depth in Chapter Three. However, Atwood's relationship to the Women's Movement has not been one of simple endorsement, especially when it comes to what the author describes as feminist 'obligations' to create 'positive' female characters. Atwood raised this issue in an address she gave in 1994 and which was entitled 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature'. She asked whether it was not 'somehow *unfeminist*' today to depict 'a woman behaving badly?' Atwood went on to argue that the advent of Feminism, while allowing 'the expansion of the territory available to writers', and offering 'a sharp-eyed examination of the way power works in gender relations, and the exposure of

much of this as socially constructed', also brought about restrictions on the choices of the feminist writer. '[Are] all heroines to be essentially spotless of soul – struggling against, fleeing from or done in by male oppression?', Atwood wondered, or 'in another word – [are] men to get all the juicy parts?'¹⁷

Atwood denounces these restrictions, and puts them down to Feminism oppressing the female artist's creativity, as patriarchy had done in the past. She added that writers needed to push against the notion that only men can be 'villains' and women victims, while explaining that:

female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open [...]. They can be explorations of moral freedom – because everyone's choices are limited, and women's choices have been more limited than men's, but that doesn't mean women can't make choices.¹⁸

Atwood eventually pointed out two reasons why '[e]vil women are necessary in story traditions': 'they exist in life, so why shouldn't they exist in literature?', and the fact that 'women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression?'¹⁹ The use of 'negative' female stereotypes as a way to empower women's causes is a concept which will be particularly useful in the study of *Alias Grace*, but also in the poems 'Marrying the Hangman' and 'Half-Hanged Mary' which will be examined in Chapter Two. Atwood has also used a similarly 'negative' female character, as well as a negative representation of the relationships between women, in her novels *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993). The description of the cruel and perverse bullying carried out between little girls in the former, and the manipulating, ruthless and lying character of Zenia in the latter, both promote the idea that new female role models are needed, ones which acknowledge women's faults and shortcomings, while discarding unattainable ideals of feminine perfection and virtue. In other words, female characters need to be freed from unrealistic social expectations, and allowed to explore their potential for being bad as well as good.

Atwood has also repeatedly shown a concern with the postcolonial status of Canada, and with the ways in which its former imperial relationship with the United Kingdom, and its

¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', from www.owtoad.com/vlness.html (September 6th 2002).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

'neo-imperialist' relationship with the United States, have affected Canada's nation formation process. Atwood often mentions the fact that, as a child, she learnt more about the history of England and America than about that of her own country, while the literature she studied was also mostly produced in these places, as it was felt that there was no such thing as 'Canadian literature'. This was the cultural context in which she chose to become a writer, and these circumstances have affected her during her formative years. Her celebration of the Canadian wilderness, mentioned above, is one way in which she sought to address the specificity of the Canadian experience, and the importance of the local in terms of place and people, in the definition of a notion of 'Canadian identity'. At the heart of this concern is also the wish to assert a national consciousness for Canada, in the context of its postcolonial link with Great Britain, but also in that of its economic and political relation with America. For these reasons, Atwood has often been considered a nationalist author, speaking for the cause of Canada's values and cultural identity in the face of an imperialist American power. These issues she raises in *Surfacing*, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in *Alias Grace*, and to a certain degree, in *Oryx and Crake*.

Atwood also highlights the importance of history in the establishment of a national cultural identity by examining the relationship between history and fiction, as with *The Handmaid's Tale*, which offers an interesting exploration of notions of utopia and dystopia, time and memory. The narrative aspect of history, and the degree of political manipulation involved in the history writing process are vividly depicted throughout the novel, and especially in the often quoted 'Historical Notes' at the end of the narrative, in which academic historians end up questioning the authenticity of the manuscript entitled 'The Handmaid's Tale', namely, the very narrative of the novel. In *The Robber Bride*, the character of Tony Fremont is a female historian specialising in the study of wars and battlefields. Her book in progress, entitled *Deadly Vestments: A History of Inept Military Couture*, is, quite seriously, the study of the unsuitable military uniforms soldiers have had to wear in the past, and the assessment of the ways in which these have affected the outcome of the conflicts. Tony mentions, for instance, the many British soldiers who 'died needlessly because of the redness of their uniforms', as well as the various types of 'fly-front fastenings': '[t]he drawstring, the overlap, the buttoned flap, the zipper, have all played their part in military history through the ages'.²⁰ Tony adds that war historians 'have tended to concentrate on the kings and the generals, on their decisions, on their strategy, and have overlooked more lowly, but equally

²⁰ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (Virago Press, London, 1994), p. 24.

important factors, which can, and have, put the actual soldiers – those on the sharp edge – at risk.’²¹ Tony’s approach to the study of war history is in keeping with the notion of ‘limited identities’ which will be developed in the next chapter: she focuses on the importance of small-scale details in the understanding of larger historical events. This approach is also the one developed by Atwood in *Alias Grace*, and in the other works selected in this thesis. However, the scope of the present thesis does not permit the inclusion of a full analysis of the novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Robber Bride*, as although both deal with notions of history, they do not revolve around actual female historical figures.

This overview of Atwood’s work is intended to provide an indication of the themes and issues which have most frequently been studied in relation to her writings, themes and issues which, for the most part, will be examined more in depth in later chapters. However, by no means does this overview intend to be an exhaustive list of the various readings which have been made of Atwood’s body of work: her writings have generated numerous critical responses, as varied and diverse as her work itself has been.²²

It is also relevant to mention Atwood’s book *Two Solitudes: Conversations* (1998), which she co-wrote with Quebecois writer Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, and which consists of the lengthy conversations both authors had at the occasion of two distinct interviews in 1995. The book deals with many topics of mutual interest for both writers, such as writing, their work, the importance of myth, of belonging to a territory, and the future of Canada and Quebec. This exchange between the two authors can be seen as an attempt on their part to offer a bridge between Quebecois and Canadian literature; this is especially visible in their choice of title, suggested by Beaulieu, and a play on Hugh MacLennan’s observation about Canada’s ‘two solitudes’. Through both authors’ common effort, these have become ‘two solitudes’, namely, a desire to encourage a recognition and a contact between both nations, cultures and, ultimately, literatures. As Atwood noticed, ‘[i]n our conversations, I believe we acknowledged the solitudes. We also acknowledged the greeting. If there were more

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²² See for instance Arnold E. Davidson, ‘Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid’s Tale*’, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, edited by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1988), pp. 113-21, for the importance of history and of historical writing in Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*; Annette Kolodny, ‘Margaret Atwood and the Politics of Narrative’, *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays*, edited by Arnold E. Davidson (The Modern Language Association of America, New York, 1990), pp. 90-109, for an examination of the representation of the relationships between men and women, and the issue of women’s place in society in Atwood’s work; and Eva Mackey, “Death by Landscape”: Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology’, *Canadian Woman Studies/ Les Cahiers de la femme* (Vol. 20, n° 2, 2000), pp. 125-30, for the link between Canada’s wilderness and national identity in Atwood’s work.

solicitude, on both sides of the great linguistic divide, we would all be a great deal better off.'²³

Anne Hébert, Life and Work

Anne Hébert was born in 1916, in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, Quebec, and is the author of ten novels, five plays, five books of poetry and one collection of short stories. In 1954, she won a literary scholarship from the Royal Society of Canada which allowed her to move to Paris where she would stay and write, on and off, for the next thirty-two years and up until 1998, when she moved back to Quebec permanently. Hébert then remained in Montreal until her death in January 2000. Her work has been awarded many literary prizes, both at home and abroad, including: the Prix France-Canada in 1957; the Governor General Award in 1961, 1975 and 1992; the Prix Molson in 1967; the Prix des Libraires in France and the Prix de Littérature of the Royal Academy of Belgium in 1971; the Prix de l'Académie française in 1976; the Prix Fémina in 1982; and the Prix France-Quebec in 1999. Anne Hébert has also received many honorary titles, and became a member of the Royal Society of Canada in 1960, and obtained a medal from the Académie canadienne-française in 1984.

Some of the recurrent themes and preoccupations in Hébert's work have been the tropes of exile and social alienation, the development of an *écriture féminine* emphasising the importance of the female body, the representation of 'negative' female characters as a source of female empowerment, the rebellion against patriarchal structures, but also against colonial cultural domination, and the role of the past in the establishment of a Quebecois identity. Much critical attention has been given to the themes of isolation, estrangement, and even madness in Hébert's work; themes which are often related to women's oppressed social status, as with the character of Catherine in the novel *Les Chambres de bois* (1958), but also to men's, as with François in the short story 'Le Torrent' (1950). 'Le Torrent' is based on a *fait-divers*, and narrates François's rebellion against the oppressing traditional vision of his mother, who wishes him to study at the Seminary in order to become a priest. As with many of Hébert's works, the conflict ends in tragedy, and François kills his mother to achieve freedom, an act which has been read as French Canada's symbolic killing of the oppressing

²³ Margaret Atwood and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, *Two Solicitudes: Conversations* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1998), p. xii.

weight of the mother country's cultural tradition, in order to allow a new French Canadian creative vision to emerge.²⁴

The novel *Les Fous de bassan* (1982) seems also to have been inspired by a true story, that of the disappearance and murder of two young women from an isolated Protestant community of the Gaspé Peninsula. Alienation, insanity, and suicide are the main themes raised in critical examinations of the novel which denounces the oppressive nature of a society closed in on itself, and the disabling effect which this has on its members, male and female alike. The reclusive community of *Les Fous de bassan* has also been seen to represent Quebec during its *survivance* process, a period during which Quebec strove to remain faithful to the cult of the mother country in all possible ways, and refused the potential for change available on the continent. The novel, through its multiplicity of narrative voices, raises questions as to the reliability of historical narratives and as to the impact of the personal over the 'official' in terms of historical 'facts', issues which will be developed in more depth in this thesis. However, although both 'Le Torrent' and *Les Fous de bassan* were inspired by actual historical anecdotes, they remained beyond the scope of this thesis, as their plots did not revolve around a central female protagonist, but presented the latter as a victim and an object of the hero's murderous intentions. The present study wishes to examine the ways in which the lives of actual female characters are re-inscribed by Atwood and Hébert into the framework of a Canadian/Quebécois 'herstory', and to show how their actions are envisaged from a different perspective.

Hébert has also repeatedly shown a concern with issues relating to women's oppression and victimisation in the context of a patriarchal society; however, where traditional readings of Atwood's work have highlighted her focus on the economic, political and social factors of that victimisation, usual understandings of Hébert's writings emphasise the importance she gives to the female body, both as the cause of that oppression and as a source of power to rebel against it. In *Les Fous de bassan* in particular, the (murdered) female body becomes associated with the sea, the wind and the natural elements, through which it carries out a rapprochement with the figure of the 'mother' (as evoked by the words 'mer' and 'mère' in French), and somehow is able to transcend its own death. It might be relevant to point out that, traditionally, Anglo-American Feminism has been understood to be concerned with questions of class, economic, political and social factors, while French/Francophone Feminism has usually been seen to be influenced by psychoanalysis, to

²⁴ See André Gaulin, 'Lecture politique d'Anne Hébert: Point de vue d'une protagoniste', *Québec français* (n° 92, 1994), pp. 77-82.

recognise the importance of the mother and the womb, and to see language as a gendered means of expression. Each trend of the movement could thus have had, respectively, an impact on the writings of Atwood and Hébert, but this thesis will question whether the boundary between these types of feminist thought can be so conveniently defined in the case of the two authors.

The use of a 'negative' female stereotype is also a trope which is recurrent in Hébert's work, as with her novels *Kamouraska* (1970), *Les Enfants du sabbat* (1975), *Héloïse* (1980) and *L'Enfant chargé de songes* (1992). This depiction of female 'bad' behaviour sometimes develops images associated with the Gothic, as with the character of Héloïse, a female vampire, and that of Julie, in *Les Enfants du sabbat*, a witch, while the imagery used is often striking in its physicality. Once again, the importance of the female body in the revolt against the oppressive nature of women's social roles is emphasised and powerfully illustrated by the character of soeur Julie de la Trinité, a nun in a Convent in 1930s Quebec, who rebels against the religious dictates advocating the *effacement* of the female body, as the locus of potentially 'sinful' temptations. Soeur Julie celebrates her femininity and transforms it into a source of power by using it to practice sorcery. Women's sexuality is also an important issue in the novels mentioned above, where sexual liberty becomes a struggle and a revolt, sometimes tied in with murder, as with Elisabeth in *Kamouraska*, or Héloïse in the novel of the same name. The latter heroine, through the erotic suggestion of the vampire's kiss, seduces and kills her victims chosen randomly, as so many fleeting sexual encounters, on the Paris underground.

Hébert also addressed issues linked to Quebec's history and cultural identity in the novels *Kamouraska* and *Le Premier jardin* (1988), as well as in the plays *La Cage* and *L'Île de la Demoiselle* (1990). She denounced the colonial cultural domination which has claimed, in the words of Lord Durham, that French Canada was 'a people with no history and no literature'.²⁵ As will be illustrated in this thesis, Hébert fights against this notion by asserting the importance of Quebec's local past, places and people, an approach which is in keeping with that of the 'limited identities'. Once again, this literary overview of Hébert's work is not intended to be all-encompassing but to show an awareness of the themes and issues the author has treated in her writings, themes and issues which will not all be addressed in the present study.²⁶ Finally, it seems important to point out that Hébert was aware of some of Atwood's

²⁵ See Jacques Lacoursière, Jean Provencher, Denis Vaugeois, *Canada, Québec: Synthèse historique, 1534-2000* (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 2001), p. 252.

²⁶ For a more detailed study of these themes, see Annabelle M. Rea, 'The Climate of Viol/Violence and Madness in Anne Hébert's *Les Fous de bassan*', *Québec Studies* (n° 4, 1986), pp. 170-83, for an analysis of the tropes of madness and victimisation of the female body in Hébert's novel *Les Fous de bassan*; Neil B. Bishop, *Anne*

works, namely the novels *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, as well as the books of poetry *The Circle Game* (1966) and *You Are Happy* (1974), which were found in her personal library, all first editions in English.²⁷

Historical Fiction in Contemporary French- and English-Canadian Writing

Poet Patrick Lane once noticed that for 'the generation of writers who came of age during the post-War years Canadian history became an obsession. Their desire was to write it into existence.'²⁸ In recent years, history has played a very important role in Canadian literature, and has been a source of inspiration for many of Canada's most prominent novelists: Timothy Findley, Rudy Wiebe, Robertson Davies, Anne Michaels, Alice Munro, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, Antonine Maillet, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Carol Shields, Rachel Leclerc, Jane Urquhart, and, of course, Anne Hébert and Margaret Atwood have all used the genre of historical fiction in their writings. In a lecture she gave on writing Canadian historical fiction, Atwood attributed this surge to the fact that Canadian writers '[were] more confident about [themselves]' and that they were 'now allowed to find [themselves] more interesting than [they] once did'.²⁹ She added that '[i]n this, we are part of a worldwide movement that has found writers and readers, especially in ex-colonies, turning back toward their own roots'.³⁰ Moreover, 'by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves' in the present.³¹ This, for Atwood, explains the renewed interest in historical fiction in Canada.

As for French-Canadian literature, a similar rise of the historical novel has been noticed since the 1980s. Nancy Desjardins points out that this re-appropriation of history is motivated by a quest for one's origins and sense of self.³² In the case of historical fiction authored by women, Desjardins notices that the use of a historical space and time is brought about by the will to give voice to history's female protagonists, a fact which will be

Hébert, son oeuvre, leurs exils (Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, Talence, 1993) for the theme of exile and the representation of space in Hébert's work; and Robert Harvey, *Poétique d'Anne Hébert: Jeunesse et genèse* (Éditions de L'Instant même, Montreal, 2000) which looks at the importance of the past and the trope of the 'new beginning' in Hébert's poem *Le Tombeau des rois*.

²⁷ The contents of Anne Hébert's personal library are held at the Centre Anne-Hébert, University of Sherbrooke, Quebec.

²⁸ Patrick Lane, 'The Unyielding Phrase', *Canadian Literature* (n° 122 and 123, 1989), p. 59.

²⁹ Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *The American Historical Review* (Vol. 103, n° 5, 1998), pp. 1510-11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1511.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1512.

³² Nancy Desjardins, 'Le Passé recomposé: La présence de l'Histoire dans le roman québécois contemporain (1980-1995)', *Thèse, antithèse, synthèse II*, edited by Marie-Pierre Coulombe and Yolaine Duchesne (UQAM, Comité étudiant du doctorat en études littéraires, Montreal, 1999), p. 46.

highlighted in the discussion of the works under study in the present thesis. Desjardins also underlines two distinct ways in which Quebecois authors have attempted to renew the writing of historical fiction: by mingling innovation and tradition, and with the technique of 'story-within-a-story', by which several different time periods, and several different stories, are treated simultaneously.³³ The latter technique in particular creates distance, polysemy, and irony through the establishment of a double movement between the narrative in the present, and the narrative in the (historical) past. This has allowed contemporary Quebecois authors to return to the genre of historical fiction and to renew it, while giving rise to some fresh thinking on both history and historiography.³⁴

Similarly, Herb Wylie, Jennifer Andrews and Robert Viau, the editors of a recent issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature/ Études en littérature canadienne* dedicated to Canadian historical fiction, observed in their introduction that '[i]n Canada, historical fiction explores the fundamental aspects of both Canadian history, specifically, and the writing of history, more generally.'³⁵ They add that Canadian historical fiction has been concerned not only with the politics of historical representation, addressing 'some of the darker corners of Canadian history' and focussing on 'characters quite different from the usual leaders of the historical pageant', but also with drawing 'attention to the mechanics of historical representation – the conventions and textual devices that both permit and complicate the representation of pastness.'³⁶ This double authorial intention will be at the heart of the works examined in the present study, both in the form of a focus on unknown and forgotten (female) characters from Canada's past, and in that of a probing into the nature of history writing.

Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction, which she develops in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988), will be useful in our analysis; historiographic metafiction is defined by the increasing self-consciousness of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, and by the political strategies which these writings carry. Hutcheon explains that to 'write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control', as 'it is the story of the victors that usually gets told.'³⁷ In Quebecois literary criticism, Janet M. Paterson has written about the 'post-modern historical novel', in which thinking about history, thinking oneself into history,

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁵ Herb Wylie, Jennifer Andrews and Robert Viau, 'Past Matters/ Choses du passé', Introduction, *Studies in Canadian Literature/ Études en littérature canadienne* (Vol. 27, n° 1, 2002), p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1988), p. 72.

re-thinking history, or even locating oneself historically to question oneself as a writing subject, are recurrent themes.³⁸ It will be shown how, in the context of postcolonial Canada, and in that of 'colonised' Quebec, the writing of historical fiction holds a political purpose: as Atwood explained above, the feeling of finding oneself 'interesting' is also the feeling of overcoming the weight of colonial cultural hegemony which dictated that, previously, one was not 'interesting'. Through the re-assertion of their local values, Canadian and Quebecois writers are pushing against the notion of what has been traditionally accepted as aesthetically worthy. Such traditions have been established in the past, and it could be argued that these writers' attempts at re-visiting the past, and at re-interpreting it, have thus to do with their will to assert a renewed sense of self, and worth, in the present.

The particular political and cultural status of Canada as a postcolonial nation can thus be linked to this resurgence in historical fiction. The story of a nation's past is indeed the tool with which it can define its future, it is therefore a source of empowerment in its process of nation formation and assertion. Patrick Lane has observed that through the writing of historical fiction, and '[a]s they explored their imagined place [Canadian novelists] created a new image of Canada. This remaking or reimagining transformed the official record, the facts as they were known. To these writers history had to be revised.'³⁹ This notion of 're-imagining' or 're-interpreting' history has had predominance in recent critical discussions both in Quebec and in the rest of Canada, by which authors expressed the need to return to key episodes of the past in order to assess the ways in which the historical narratives had been formed then. This has been visible in Quebec especially, in the numerous re-readings of the writings of the period of the Quiet Revolution. In this context, the expression 'historical re-writing' which is used in the present thesis will refer precisely to this notion of historical re-interpretation, as it has been expressed by women writers, in the purpose of addressing women's 'absence' from historical records.

³⁸ Nancy Desjardins, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43, quoting from Janet M. Paterson, *Moments postmodernes dans le roman québécois* (University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1993), p. 54.

³⁹ Patrick Lane, 'The Unyielding Phrase', *Op. Cit.*, p. 59.

Women's Writing in English and French Canada

Margaret Atwood once observed that when studying English Canadian literature, one could not ignore the female writers, for as far back as the nineteenth century, with such authors as Susanna Moodie, Catherine Parr Traill, Anne Langton and Anna Jameson, and up until the present day, women writers had always been relatively significant in Canada. Atwood ascribed this to the fact that English Canada was settled essentially in the nineteenth century, in the age of the letter and the journal, traditionally seen as female forms of writing, and at a time when many women were already literate. The four female writers mentioned above were gentlewomen whose class, according to Atwood, gave them 'a literary edge over those of their less well-educated fellow citizens who happened to be male'.⁴⁰ Atwood added that a similar situation was found in French Canada, where some of the first writings were authored by nuns who had come to convert the Native population.

With the advent of the Women's Movement in the 1970s, female writers in Quebec began to express radical subversion through literary experimentation. That period saw the rise of a particular type of women's writing seeking to renew the way women were perceived and proposing new strategies in terms of form; as a result, experimentalism became a norm in the work of Quebecois female authors, as seen in the writings of Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon and Denise Boucher. In the 1980s, however, and after the feminist movement had reached its peak, Quebecois women's writing entered a new phase which Lori Saint-Martin described as *métaféminisme*. Rejecting the intense experimentalism of the 70s, the new trend expressed objectives which differed from those of feminist writing and its overt political agenda, such as abolishing patriarchy and developing a feminine culture.⁴¹ *Métaféminisme*, according to Saint-Martin, does not mention Feminism but rather takes distance from the movement: although its authors do agree with its political views, many feel this should not mean that their creativity has to be restricted to the defence of a particular cause.⁴² These women writers thus wish to maintain their liberty of expression, and to keep their work independent from any political affiliation. This particular relationship with Feminism has been raised earlier in relation to Atwood's claims to the importance of being

⁴⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Susanna Moodie', draft version of the introduction Atwood wrote for Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (Virago Press, London, 1986). This draft is filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers, at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, which holds the main body of Margaret Atwood's manuscripts as well as her entire collected works, both published and unpublished.

⁴¹ Lori Saint-Martin, 'Le Métaféminisme et la nouvelle prose féminine au Québec', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 18, n° 1, 1992), p. 81.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

able to create 'bad', as well as good, female characters in literature, but a similar preoccupation will also be addressed in the study of Hébert's writings.

In English Canada, the subversive and experimental literary styles which were predominant in 1970s Quebec were still a minority at the time, and became more widespread only in the late 1970s and 80s, with the writings of Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin and Di Brandt. Linda Hutcheon observed that, differently 'from Québec women writers [...] with their more overtly radical challenges, Canadian women writing in English [...] use a disguised form of subversion that implicitly questions prevailing authority.'⁴³ Hutcheon adds that these women writers are not more conservative or traditionally realist, but rather that 'one can only assume and challenge selfhood [...] or subjectivity when one has attained it', while if 'women have not yet been allowed access to (male-defined) subjectivity, then it is very difficult for them to contest it'.⁴⁴ She points out that recently there has been a critical emphasis upon 'the relation between the national search for a Canadian cultural identity and the feminist seeking for a distinctive female identity in terms of the paradoxical (and post-modern) recognition and contesting of colonial positions with respect to the power of dominating cultures.'⁴⁵ Atwood's work is a good example of this, in particular her novel *Surfacing*, but also her poem sequence *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* which will be examined in Chapter Two, and where the life of a nineteenth-century pioneer woman is used to define a twentieth-century national consciousness for Canada.

One of the ways in which Canadian female writers have operated this double recognition and contesting, according to Hutcheon, has been through the use of ironic intertextuality, or parody, as a means of both marking 'a *rupture* with, or at least a subversion or critique of, the text parodied', and of showing 'a kind of interpretative *continuity*'.⁴⁶ Hutcheon notices that the latter is 'most often true when it is women's work that is cited, or even parodied, by women artists', as in Atwood's poem cycle which, once again, takes inspiration from Susanna Moodie's writings.⁴⁷ Hutcheon adds that these different uses of irony have allowed feminist artists to re-examine the politics of (gender) representation. This thesis strives to explore the ways in which Atwood, but also Hébert, have managed to voice a form of protest, and to challenge dominant patriarchal and colonial ideologies through their

⁴³ Linda Hutcheon, 'The Canadian Postmodern: Fiction in English Since 1960', *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays*, edited by Arnold E. Davidson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1991), p. 96. Emphasis in the original text.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

use of irony. Hutcheon concludes that fiction authored by contemporary Canadian women writers has 'wrought changes in the novel, in its traditional forms as well as its themes',⁴⁸ and has brought about a 'radical critique of totalizing systems and so-called universal Truths', a critique which is 'enacted *in* the literature itself'.⁴⁹

This overview of women's writing in English and French Canada sets up the cultural context and literary framework within which the works of Atwood and Hébert were produced. Marie Carrière's observation that, with 'the growing presence and development of Feminism through experimental writing in both English and French, we can therefore conclude that there has been less of a gap between the two cultures [...], if not in terms of an entire literary past, at least in terms of certain literary moments', provides a convenient bridge for introducing the critical discussion at hand.⁵⁰ Although the works under study do not belong to the genre of experimental feminist writing, the notion of rapprochement in terms of literary moments organised along the axis of women's social status, and of Canada's and Quebec's postcolonial cultural identity, is pertinent for the present thesis, and will enable us to see whether the 'two solitudes' mentioned earlier can become 'two solitudes'.

Because of the importance given to history and to types of historical writings, or historiography, in the works selected, it seems relevant to begin this study with a brief historical outline of Canada and Quebec, and to give an overview of the current historiographical debates in both, while offering a definition of the notion of 'limited identities', which will be crucial in the discussion to follow: this will be the object of Chapter One. Chapter Two will examine Margaret Atwood's 1970 poem cycle *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, where the poet focuses on the writings of the nineteenth-century female settler and explores the issues of alienation, displacement and loss associated with her pioneering experience in Canada. Atwood would later re-visit the writings of Susanna Moodie, as will be shown in *Grace*, her unpublished play, while Chapter Two ends with the study of two poems and a short story in which she also finds inspiration in the life stories of female characters from the past. Chapter Three will be dedicated to the study of Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace*, and will illustrate the ways in which the narrative adopts a 'limited identities' approach to the re-writing of the life of a nineteenth-century handmaid accused of murder. It will also be shown how this constitutes yet another re-visiting of Moodie's

⁴⁸ Linda Hutcheon, "'Shape Shifters": Canadian Women Novelists and the Challenge to Tradition', *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Longspoon/NeWest Press, Alberta, 1986), p. 226.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220. Emphasis in the original text.

⁵⁰ Marie Carrière, *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 14.

writings on Atwood's part. Chapter Four will be concerned with the examination of Anne Hébert's 1970 novel *Kamouraska*, in which notions of historical narratives and private past will be challenged. The ways in which *Alias Grace*'s and *Kamouraska*'s similarities of plot and of authorial intentions provide a link in the study of both authors will also be illustrated. Chapter Five will explore Hébert's two plays *La Cage* and *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, published jointly in 1990, and will address the author's attempt to re-interpret Quebec's history and to alter Quebecois women's destinies. Finally, Chapter Six will examine Hébert's 1988 novel *Le Premier jardin* and assess the ways in which, through the use of artistic creativity, the novel's heroine manages to establish a Quebecois 'herstory'.

Chapter One:

Recent Canadian Historiography

This chapter proposes to set up the historiographical context within which Anne Hébert and Margaret Atwood have produced the literary works in which they deal with Canadian history and with actual Canadian historical figures. Although most of these works revolve around little known or forgotten characters and omit to mention events and people which belong to mainstream Canadian history, it seems necessary to start with a brief historical outline of both Quebec and Canada. This will allow us to better appreciate the elements which Atwood and Hébert have selected or left out in their narratives, and understand why they might have done so. While bearing in mind that Quebec regards itself as a separate nation within the Canadian Confederation, this historical overview will strive to bring together those elements of the past which concern both Quebec and the rest of Canada, while emphasising, where need be, those specific events which have had a particular significance for the one or the other. An understanding of the essential fact that any history telling process is a constructed narrative will inform and motivate the study of the various trends of historiography which have predominated in Canadian historical writing. Moreover, we will especially focus on those trends that concern the second half of the twentieth century, the period during which most of the literary production of Anne Hébert and Margaret Atwood was carried out. We will first look at recent Anglo-Canadian historiography, before moving on to Quebecois history writing, in order to compare and contrast the historical and national narratives at work in Quebec and in the rest of Canada today.

Brief Historical Outline of Canada

Canada was first colonised by European settlers in 1608, when the French started to occupy the region of the St Lawrence valley. This marked the beginning of the French Regime in the newly discovered territory of Canada, a regime which aimed at reproducing most of the institutional structures of France: French law, Catholic religion, French language and a feudal form of power organisation; the colony became officially known as *Nouvelle France*. In response to this, the English formed the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, through which they

intended to exert control over the fur trade in the entire region drained by the Hudson Bay. A British-French rivalry ensued and lasted for almost a century, up until 1763 when France finally lost most of its possessions in North America and England became the new master of the Canadian colony. This event would haunt the French Canadian community subsequently, and has had important repercussions in the way it has perceived itself up to the present day. In 1774, however, England passed the Quebec Act which restored in great part what the arrival of the English had suppressed in 1763: French civil law, the feudal system and an increased freedom for the Catholic Church, which helped French Canada maintain a strong link with its mother country. The Act of 1774, by recognising the specificity of the French Canadians and granting them some rights accordingly, also helped raise their national sense of identity.

After the American Revolution (1775-83), the population of Canada was augmented by Loyalists fleeing the newly formed United States of America, which led the British to divide the colony into two entities in 1791, Upper and Lower Canada, and to extend to both provinces British institutions and constitutional rights. The fact that this division followed an ethnic line of demarcation also reinforced the sense of national identity of the Francophone population, in Lower Canada. However, strong economic and political dissatisfaction led to open rebellions in both provinces in 1837 and 1838: they were started by the reformer William Lyon Mackenzie in Upper Canada and by Louis-Joseph Papineau and his republican group the *Patriotes* in Lower Canada; both worked independently and aimed at implementing political change. But the Rebellions failed in their attempts and were crushed by the authorities who killed and transported many of the rebels. These events are still remembered today as the 'failed Rebellions of 1837-38' and have played an important role in the way in which French- and English-Canadians have perceived themselves subsequently. They are also mentioned briefly in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Alias Grace*, as well as in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*, as will be seen in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Some immediate change was however brought about through Lord Durham's 1839 Report in which he advocated the reunion of Lower and Upper Canada into the Province of Canada and the granting of responsible government to the new province. His recommendations were carried out in 1841, to the dismay of the French Canadian population who considered this a damaging reprisal and an attempt at assimilation by the dominant British power, so as to eradicate their desire for freedom. In the Province of Canada, the Anglophone population became the majority, while the French language was partially banned in the Assembly and in courts of justice.

These particular circumstances helped set in place what is now known as the paradigm of *survivance* in French Canada: after the failure of the attempts at independence, the population felt it would never be able to achieve political and economic sovereignty. Consequently, many thought that the survival of the French Canadian nation could only be ensured through the preservation of their culture, by which they meant protecting French traditions, celebrating French customs and being faithful in all possible ways to the cult of the mother country. This attitude would set for a long time the intellectual discourse in French Canada in a relation of dependence with that of France, through its submission to the French model in the domain of the arts in particular, and its depreciation of any artistic expression inspired by local places and people. The Catholic church also played an important role in the *survivance* process as it turned the survival of the Catholic religion into a national crusade, together with the protection of the French language: both came to be seen as the two founding pillars of the French Canadian nation. During the same period, the British population in Canada also showed a desire to follow the model of its imperial centre in matters of politics and economy, but also arts and culture, thus maintaining a strong colonial link with England.

In 1867, the provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick agreed to a common scheme for Confederation, and the British North America Act gave the Confederation the status of Dominion. In subsequent years the Dominion greatly expanded as more and more provinces joined the Confederation, but the prosperity that accompanied Canada into the twentieth century was marred by continuing disagreement between English- and French-speaking communities. During the First World War, serious questions concerning Canadian participation in British foreign military involvements particularly affected the French Canadian community who opposed conscription (compulsory military service). After World War I, Canada pursued a foreign policy increasingly independent of British control.

Anglophone and Francophone intellectuals progressively became 'reconciled' with their environment and developed what is described in French Canada as the discourse of *américanité*. The latter refers to a way of thought which advocates a rapprochement with the continent and a renewed assertion of national identity, but this time without the relationship of dependence to the mother country. In French Canada, the traditional criteria of the Catholic religion and French origins as the defining features of the nation were progressively replaced by a reference to French language only: this was confirmed in 1974 by a law which gave French the status of official language in Quebec. However, it was also thought in French Canada that the political and economic links with the Canadian Confederation constituted an obstacle preventing French Canadians from fully embracing their *américanité*. An instance of

this can be seen in the way the term *Canadien français* was progressively replaced by *Québécois*, as a means of both differentiating oneself from the rest of the Confederation and asserting one's belonging to a specific territory (Quebec).

In the 1960s and 70s, French Canada's ideological assertions of national identity became political: this was the period of the 'Quiet Revolution'. Quebecois separatism became a major issue for the Confederation as a whole, and the victory of René Levesque and his separatist *Parti Québécois* in the 1976 provincial elections crystallised Canadians' fears about the nation's future. Some in Quebec also felt the need for more radical action and founded the *Front de libération du Québec*, a small armed group which promoted the idea of social and political revolution through violence. In October 1970, the group kidnapped two government officials and killed one of them. This tragic event, however, constitutes the only instance of violent behaviour throughout the whole period of the Quiet Revolution.

Yet, the *Parti Québécois* organised a referendum on political separation in 1980, to which the Quebecois vote was negative. In order to strengthen what was seen as a fragile nation, the British North America Act was repatriated to Canada, thus giving Canada total control over its constitution and severing its legal ties with the United Kingdom. The Canada Act was approved in 1982 and made Canada a fully sovereign state; most notably it contained a Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guaranteed thirty-four rights, including religious freedom, minority language education and cultural tolerance, to all Canadians. Quebec however was the only province that did not approve the Canada Act, and in order to induce the Quebecois to accept it, the federal government proposed a set of constitutional reforms known as the 'Meech Lake Accord'. The Accord's basic points included a guarantee of Quebec's special status as a 'distinct society' and a commitment to Canada's linguistic duality, while also providing Quebec with a provincial right to constitutional veto as well as increased provincial powers over immigration. However, many women's and Native rights groups denounced the Accord for not being representative of the Canadian population as a whole, and two out of ten provinces failed to approve it. The Meech Lake Accord thus 'died' in 1990, leading many Quebecois to reconsider independence. This brought about the 1995 Referendum in which Quebec once again rejected separation, although by a very slim majority.¹

¹ Sources for this historical outline are: *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, edited by James H. Marsh *et al* (Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, 1985); Jacques Lacoursière, Jean Provencher, Denis Vaugeois, *Canada, Québec: Synthèse historique, 1534-2000* (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 2001); *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol. 2, 15th Edition, Chicago, 1992); *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (6th Edition, Columbia University Press, 2001).

Recent Trends in English-Canadian Historiography

In recent years, Canadian historians in Quebec and in the rest of Canada have shown a particular concern with the re-reading and re-evaluating of Canada's history and of its role in the formation of the Canadian nation. In Quebec, this was expressed by a need to go back to the period of the Quiet Revolution in order to examine how the (Quebécois) national discourse was initially formed. In the rest of Canada, this was made visible by the initiative taken by the editors of the *Canadian Historical Review* in their 2000 and 2001 issues, where 'in an effort to sustain [Canada's] collective historical memory', they invited 'some of the nation's most respected historians' to reflect on the themes that they considered helped define Canada in the twentieth century.² This section will strive to examine this process of historical re-interpretation at work in contemporary English Canada.

Through the *Canadian Historical Review* forum on the role Canadian history should play in the formation of the Canadian nation, a major divide arose between two conflicting views on the matter. On the one hand, J.L. Granatstein's polemical work *Who Killed Canadian History?*³ and Michael Bliss's article 'Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada'⁴ both denounced recent trends in Canadian history writing: namely, the massive shift in historians' substantive interests away from political and constitutional history and towards the exploration of people's experiences according to their region, ethnicity, class and gender. Michael Bliss called this the 'privatization' of historical writing, adding that this increased concern with the realms of the private and the personal had brought about the 'dis-integration' of Canadian history. Bliss and Granatstein both feel it is historians' growing interest in such topics as 'the history of housemaid's knee in Belleville in the 1890s',⁵ to use Granatstein's often quoted expression, which is responsible for the 'sundering' of Canadian national history as it has traditionally been understood.⁶ Bliss points out that by the 1980s the interests of intellectuals, including historians, had been so thoroughly 'privatized' that there existed no body of writing or thought describing the links that might bind Canadians to one another. He criticizes the fact that historians have stopped writing 'readable' histories of Canada, and that since Donald

² The Editors, *The Canadian Historical Review*, Introduction (Vol. 81, n° 2, 2000), p. 229.

³ J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Harper Collins, Toronto, 1998).

⁴ Michael Bliss, 'Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada', *The Journal of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 26, n° 4, 1991-92), pp. 5-17.

⁵ J.L. Granatstein, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

Creighton's *Dominion of the North* (1944) and W.L. Morton's *The Kingdom of Canada* (1964) no single-volume syntheses of Canadian history of comparable 'range, readability and personal witness' have been published.⁷

Bliss also links this 'dis-integration' of Canadian history with the 'sundering of Canadians' consciousness of themselves as a people' and the 'withering of a sense of community in Canada', which he then relates to the nation's 'current constitutional and political malaise.'⁸ According to him, '[Canadians] are immersed in the most intense debate about their future as a people since Confederation',⁹ and in such a time he condemns the fact that historians should decide to abdicate from what he considers their role as 'national sages'.¹⁰ The anxiety he expresses about the nation's future and the state of its politics is a recurrent issue in Canadian historical writing. It is usually prompted by the 'threat' from the giant US neighbour and its economic superiority but has been renewed lately by events taking place within the Confederation itself. The two recent Quebec Referendums on separation and the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990 have had a deep impact on the population's sense of itself as a united people. Bliss claims in particular that in the aftermath of the Meech Lake Accord, 'ordinary' Canadians repeatedly expressed a sense of not understanding their country, of not knowing 'who they were, where they had come from, and whither they were going'.¹¹ Both he and Granatstein feel it is their responsibility, as historians, to help Canadians understand what links bind them to one another by creating an imagined community for the nation. Bliss, for instance, advocates the drafting of a 'Canada Clause' in the constitution, specifying who Canadians are as a people and what values they uphold.

However, underlying Bliss's criticism of contemporary historical attitudes, one seems to discern a plea for the type of historical writing the 'grand old men of Canadian history' have produced in the past. Bliss mentions in particular such historians as Donald Creighton, W.L. Morton, A.R.M. Lower and Frank Underhill, all 'nationalist historians, more interested in the public history of the making of Canada than in the private lives of the Canadian people'.¹² He remembers also the presidential addresses these men used to deliver to the Canadian Historical Association, in which they talked about history's role in the shaping of a national consciousness, the great men and important events which had 'created' the country

⁶ Michael Bliss, *Op. Cit.*, p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

and its identity, and the role historians ought to play in the development of a national culture. Bliss seems to miss these men's influence in public affairs, as he denounces the fact that today few Canadian historians are contributing much to political debates.¹³

A brief look at works such as W.L. Morton's *The Canadian Identity* (1961) might be useful here in order to illustrate the type of historical attitude Bliss is praising. I will refer in particular to one of the chapters which is entitled 'The Relevance of Canadian History' and which is taken from the presidential address Morton gave to the Canadian Historical Association in Kingston, Ontario, in 1960.¹⁴ In this address, Morton explained that by 'Canadian history' he meant 'one history, not one French and one British' as indeed '[t]here are not two histories, but one history, as there are not two Canadas, or any greater number, but only one.'¹⁵ This view fundamentally goes against the understanding that, history being a constructed narrative, there are as many histories as there are historical perspectives. Moreover, Morton's added claim that '[t]here is but one narrative line in Canadian history',¹⁶ illustrates an historical attitude which clearly excludes from the historical discourse a large number of minority groups. The views Morton expressed in this address bear witness to a rather narrow and synthesised vision of history, one which, for instance, does not take into account the fact of French Canadian political and cultural specificity within the nation, as illustrated by his denial of a 'French history'. This statement is particularly striking given its historical context: 1960 marks the dawn of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, a period of heightened political and cultural activism which aimed at asserting and celebrating the French Canadian nation in all its distinctive features. Morton's historiographic approach, with its attempt at homogenisation and synthesis, prevents many of Canada's diverse minorities from participating in its historical narrative. Morton further exemplified this by asserting that '[h]istory is neither neat nor categorical', as indeed 'it defines by what is central, not by what is peripheral.'¹⁷ His statement raises obvious problems, such as defining what should be considered 'central' and what should stay 'peripheral', but also demonstrates Morton's apparent lack of objectivity: he looked at Canadian history from a very specific perspective – that of a white, Ontario-based man – but yet did not acknowledge the influence these characteristics had on his vision of history, as he assumed them to be the norm. This bias was not solely directed at French Canadians however, but also at the 'whole culture of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴ W.L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1961).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

northern and maritime frontier', by which Morton meant some of Canada's Native peoples, whom, in order to 'succeed as well as survive', required from the (European) metropolitan culture 'a high religion, a great literature, and the best available science and technology to overcome [their] inherent limitations.'¹⁸ Morton asked indeed:

[w]as not the basic difference between the north European and the Eskimo that the former had a central and metropolitan economy and culture on which to draw, while the latter had none until very recent times [...]?'¹⁹

The Euro-centric attitude inherently expressed in Morton's view vividly illustrates the type of ethnic prejudice Native Canadians have been victims of since the earliest days of the colony. Morton confirms this by adding that '[o]ne may hope that Canada is at least giving those wonderful people *the central base they lacked* for so many unrecorded centuries.'²⁰ The synthetic and homogenous vision of Canadian history which Morton offers thus brings about ethnic exclusion, or assimilation, instead of national unity. The rigidity of the criteria determining what is central, and therefore worthy of inclusion in Canada's historical narrative, and what should remain at its periphery, because of a lack of relevance, or 'central base', prevents the recognition of the important roles played by Canada's numerous minorities in its process of nation formation. This becomes particularly relevant in the case of the French Canadian nation, as its cultural and political specificity has been the object of several historical attempts at assimilation by the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, as seen for instance in Lord Durham's 1839 Report. These attempts had brought about the French Canadian paradigm of *survivance*, which the Quiet Revolution was about to eradicate.

The historical attitude adopted by Morton and others at the time was however about to undergo a drastic change in the coming decades. Since the end of the 1960s and up until today, historians such as Professor Ramsay Cook and J.M.S. Careless have published groundbreaking works in which they advocate a greater focus on people's experiences according to their region, class and ethnicity, in an attempt to promote 'analysis' instead of 'synthesis' in Canadian historiography.²¹ This they called the 'limited identities' approach to Canadian history, a phrase coined by Ramsay Cook in his 1967 article 'Canadian Centennial

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Ramsay Cook, 'Canadian Centennial Celebrations', *International Journal* (Vol. 22, 1967), pp. 659-63; J.M.S. Careless, "'Limited Identities" in Canada', *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 50, n° 1, 1969), pp. 1-10; Ramsay Cook, "'Identities Are Not Like Hats"', *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 81, n° 2, 2000), pp. 260-65.

Cerebrations'. The date was significant as it marked the 100th anniversary of the British North America Act by which Canada gained the status of Dominion. But the centennial year also brought about an acute renewal in historians' and intellectuals' anxiety about what they commonly referred to as 'Canada's perennial problem', namely its lack of national unity and identity. Cook addressed this issue by calling for a new attitude in the understanding of what the nation was about:

[I]nstead of constantly deploring our lack of identity we should attempt to understand and explain the regional, ethnic and class identities that we *do* have. It might just be that it is in these limited identities that 'Canadianism' is found.²²

Through this new concept of 'limited identities' he advocated a different approach to Canadian history, an approach going against W.L. Morton's view that there was only 'one history, as there [were] not two Canadas [...] but one only.'²³ To this claim, J.M.S. Careless's 1969 article on "'Limited Identities" in Canada' added that if Canada was 'one nation', then indeed it was an 'eminently divisible' one.²⁴ This precisely illustrates the aim of the 'limited identities' approach: to define the nation by focussing on the effects that region, class, ethnic background and gender have had on its people's various 'Canadian experience[s]'.²⁵ Careless directly attacks the importance of the hegemonic centre upon which Canadian historical writing has focussed by asserting that these Canadian experiences 'did not greatly focus on Ottawa and the deeds of hero federal politicians, or on the meagre symbols of some all-Canadian way of life.'²⁶ This seems to be going against W.L. Morton's unified vision of history, a history which 'defines by what is central', namely Ontario and its decision-making officials.²⁷ Careless thus advocates a radically different approach to the understanding of Canada's national history, while also pointing out that Canadian historiography has often dealt 'too wishfully' with nationalism – and in consequence, with unification. He notices indeed that in 1969 Canadian historians 'are still considerably hung up on the plot of nation-building', while he feels that this 'nation-building approach' to Canadian history neglects and obscures as much as it explains and illuminates.²⁸ Careless condemns in particular the

²² Ramsay Cook, 'Canadian Centennial Cerebrations', *Op. Cit.*, p. 663. Emphasis mine.

²³ W.L. Morton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 88-89.

²⁴ J.M.S. Careless, "'Limited Identities" in Canada', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ W.L. Morton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 93.

²⁸ J.M.S. Careless, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

‘teleological cast’ of such an approach: ‘one looks for the end to be achieved; one measures developments, pro or con, in terms of the goal – a strong, united nation.’²⁹ This, according to Careless, brings about a restricted vision of history, one that is out of keeping with ‘Canadian realities’. A better way to explore these ‘realities’ is, once again, through the ‘limited identities’ of region, class, gender and ethnicity.

An important issue one might need to consider however is whether these histories of ‘limited identities’ can exist outside of more general and homogenised national narratives. In a recent article entitled “‘Identities Are Not Like Hats’”, Professor Ramsay Cook deals with this question and responds to J.L. Granatstein and Michael Bliss’s related claim that the ‘limited identities’ historical approach has provoked the ‘dis-integration’ of Canadian history. Cook opposes their ‘[r]ecent pleas for a return to so-called national history, especially when defined as “political and diplomatic history.”’³⁰ He points out that one of the most significant achievements of the new approaches to Canadian history has been precisely the severing of the ‘suffocating link between Canadian history and nationalism.’³¹ Cook denounces in particular ‘the old assumptions of nationalist historians that all “Canadians” shared the same interest, enjoyed the same national triumphs, and celebrated the same national heroes.’³² He reminds us that more than a century ago, Ernest Renan recognised that scholarly history and nationalism were incompatible,³³ and points out by contrast Granatstein’s claim that history and nationalism have the same goal and that teaching and writing ‘national’ history is essential to saving the nation and building the future.³⁴

Cook then explains that he would welcome any efforts to write the entire history of Canada, but this would have to include ‘workers and farmers, museums and asylums, women and men, [...] west and east, environment, culture, and religion.’³⁵ He adds ironically that ‘[e]ven Ontario should be included’, Ontario being once again the traditionally hegemonic

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ Ramsay Cook, “‘Identities Are Not Like Hats’”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 263, quoting from J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 146.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 264.

³³ Ernest Renan, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?’, lecture delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882. ‘What is a Nation?’, translated by Martin Thom for *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha (Routledge, London, 1990), pp. 8-22. Renan asserts that ‘a heroic past, great men, glory [...], this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.’ He therefore comes to the conclusion that ‘forgetting’ and even ‘historical error’ are crucial factors in the creation of a nation, as the essence of a nation is that all its individuals have many things in common, but also that they ‘have forgotten many things.’ Thus historical enquiry often constitutes a ‘danger for [the principle of] nationality’ in bringing to light the deeds of violence which, according to Renan, are intrinsic to the establishment of a national unity.

³⁴ Ramsay Cook, “‘Identities Are Not Like Hats’”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 264, quoting from J.L. Granatstein, *Op. Cit.*, p. 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

‘centre’ from which perspective historical accounts have usually been told. Cook insists that the ‘building blocks’ for this new Canadian history should be ‘studies of “limited identities” properly conceived.’³⁶ Indeed, he recognizes that his ‘limited identities’ concept too often shares with the ‘national identities’ approach a simplistic and monolithic attitude to historical experience. Identities, he adds, are ‘neither hermetically sealed nor easily defined; their edges are always fuzzy and shifting.’³⁷ Cook recommends, instead of ‘limited’, to talk about ‘multiple, relational, shifting, contingent’ identities, finding these terms more in keeping with his meaning.³⁸ He then concludes that ‘Canadian history is neither dead nor even seriously wounded; it is alive, well, even thriving as it becomes increasingly inclusive of all its past actors.’³⁹

This attempt at including all of Canada’s past and often forgotten actors in its historical narrative is a concept that proves particularly useful when looking at the literary works which will come under examination in the next chapters of this thesis. Both Anne Hébert and Margaret Atwood have written about actual but minor historical figures, mostly women and often female criminals, in an effort to re-claim a place in the past for these overlooked characters. Atwood in particular gave a clear example of the relevance of the ‘limited identities’ concept to her work at the occasion of the Bronfman Lecture which she delivered at the University of Ottawa, in 1996. Her address was entitled ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’ and dealt with the research process involved in the writing of the life of Grace Marks for her novel *Alias Grace*. Atwood pointed out how ‘history may intend to provide us with grand patterns and overall schemes, but without its brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations, it would collapse. Whoever tells you that history is not about individuals, only about large trends and movements, is lying.’⁴⁰ This view seems to be in direct relation with Cook’s ‘limited identities’ concept and similarly emphasises the importance of looking at history in the detail of its different actors, and of taking into account the various specifications attached to them. Atwood also added that throughout the process of doing research for *Alias Grace*, she was:

often deeply frustrated, [...] not by what [historians] had written down but by what they’d left out. History is more than willing to tell you who won the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁴⁰ Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’, *The American Historical Review* (Vol. 103, n° 5, 1998), p. 1505.

Battle of Trafalgar and which world leader signed this or that treaty, but it is frequently reluctant about the now-obscure details of daily life. Nobody wrote these things down because everybody knew them, and considered them too mundane and unimportant to record.⁴¹

Atwood here emphasises the rift between official history, in the sense of political and diplomatic, and the unofficial or mundane history of people's daily lives. As will be shown through the study of *Alias Grace*, the 'unimportant' details of these lives, such as how to remove mildew stains from a shirt, what kind of clothing was worn in winter, or how often women would wash their hair in the nineteenth century, are placed at the forefront of the novel's narrative and thus given a central importance. This helps Atwood show how, in fact, the 'mundane' particulars of people's lives have intrinsic effects on the tragic events of the story. For instance, if nineteenth-century house-maids did not have to share their beds with other fellow maids for the purpose of warmth during the cold Canadian winters and for space-saving in their masters' house, Grace would not have known about Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper she allegedly helped kill, sharing the master's bed instead of hers. Similarly, the very specific hierarchy attached to clothing, in which a person's class is revealed by his/her dress, helps us understand Grace's jealousy over Nancy wearing clothes above her station on account of her being the master's lover. Atwood vividly illustrates the ways in which these pieces of (mundane) knowledge are in fact crucial in the description of the nature of the relationships between the different characters of the story, and in the description of the motivations behind their actions.

Similarly, if unimportant and ordinary details can have such tremendous consequences for the understanding of a particular story, therefore 'unimportant' and 'ordinary' people can also have a relevance and a role to play in the history of the period, which, it seems, is what Atwood tries to illustrate in *Alias Grace*, but also on various other occasions throughout her literary career. Moreover, Atwood also applies this approach to 'official' historical events: she gives the example of the Rebellion of 1837, explaining how 'the shot heard 'round the world was fired on a certain date, under certain weather conditions, out of a certain rather inefficient type of gun.'⁴² She seems to suggest that had these very specific circumstances been different, the outcome of the Rebellion might not have been the same, emphasising once again the importance of these small mundane details in the execution of 'big' important historical events. This particular historical approach is also at the heart of Margaret Atwood's

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1514.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 1505.

book of social history *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840*, where she gives detailed descriptions of the ways in which people lived in the Canadian colonies at the time of the Rebellions. She highlights in particular the details of people's daily lives in the domestic realm of the home and in the public sphere of politics and elections, so as to illustrate the specific circumstances at the origin of the Rebellions.⁴³

In the context of literary works focussing especially on the roles that (unknown) female characters have played in the past, it seems important to highlight the direct relevance of the 'limited identities' approach to the recognition and establishment of women's history, the emergence of which is at the heart of both Hébert's and Atwood's authorial intentions in the works discussed in this thesis. In her 1982 historiographical article on women's history, Eliane Leslau Silverman expressed the wish to see women's history integrated into the mainstream of Canadian history: she pointed out the fact that, so far, both historical narratives were running along separate, parallel lines. Silverman also noticed that since about 1970, historians in Canada have moved away from the writing of uncritical and 'idealized' female biographies in order to seriously recognise that 'to study women's past was worthy of their best efforts.'⁴⁴ This issue of 'idealized' narratives of women's lives is central to Atwood's and Hébert's work, in so far as the women they choose to write about often stand out as a result of their criminal or controversial actions. Both authors seem to want to do away with the traditional view that women featuring in historical narratives should be setting examples of proper behaviour. In Silverman's words, '[d]id women really bring civilization, or were wives sought when men's search for morality was already in place?'⁴⁵ These are the types of questions which, she claims, women's history raises.

Silverman also adds that the population written about in women's history is a newly discovered one, and that the question of retrieving women's lives from silence has become a central concern for the burgeoning field.⁴⁶ This central concern also finds expression in the work of both Atwood and Hébert, and especially in Hébert's *Le Premier jardin*, as will be shown in Chapter Six. Silverman observes that women's history makes women the subjects – and no longer the objects – of a new body of literature in which they do not exist as the 'other' but come to play a central role on the stage of historical experience. In her view, Canada's historical narrative needs to be shaped and transformed by the inclusion of 'the

⁴³ Margaret Atwood, *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1977).

⁴⁴ Eliane Leslau Silverman, 'Writing Canadian Women's History, 1970-82: An Historiographical Analysis', *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History*, edited by Marlene Shore (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), p. 278.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

story of the female majority living in perpetual tension with the institutions that [contain] them'.⁴⁷ Besides, from the study of women's lives women's historians were able to draw connections with the study of nationality, race, gender, ethnicity, and the power of the state, thus bringing about new ways of approaching these realities and creating an upheaval in historical analysis, not unlike the one brought about by the concept of 'limited identities'. As a consequence, the once presumed natural markings of national, racial, ethnic, and sexual difference and the values upon which hierarchies of power rested, came to be seen as historical, that is, the result of various processes of evolution through time, as opposed to being considered natural, inevitable or eternal.⁴⁸ This realisation represents an empowering potential which is exploited by Hébert and Atwood in their work, in the aim of asserting the relevance of the inclusion of various minority groups, among which are women, but also the Natives and the immigrant population, in the story of Canada's past, and of denouncing the prejudiced structures of power which have kept these out of history and have denied them a historical voice.

In the 1990s, the increasing diversity of Canadian women's history made Gail Cuthbert Brandt observe that the simplicity of earlier studies was gone, and that later ones resembled a patchwork quilt, a comparison which, once again, puts one in mind of the concept of 'limited identities'.⁴⁹ Cuthbert Brandt linked the advent of this diversity to the influence of postmodernism on historical writing: she explained that many feminist historians found the latter attractive in its emphasis on difference, its recognition of the ways in which social and cultural factors create historical 'facts', and its rejection of linear, all-encompassing interpretations.⁵⁰ However, women's and gender historians have recently found themselves criticised and accused of contributing to the fragmentation of the Canadian nation. Joy Parr expressed her dismay at these accusations and re-asserted the relevance of gender history, distinct from women's history. She explained that gender history promotes the idea that 'in historical context, the social positions women and men occupy are specified in multidimensional terms, and femininity and masculinity are not cultural universals but vary

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281. It is interesting to note that by 'women's history' Canadian historians understand the history of the 'female majority' living in both Quebec and the rest of Canada: they thus (allegedly) integrate Quebecois women's history into their narratives.

⁴⁸ Joy Parr, 'Gender History and Historical Practice', *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History*, edited by Marlene Shore (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), pp. 285-86.

⁴⁹ The metaphor of the patchwork quilt as a way of illustrating Canada's multitude of 'limited identities' will be examined in more depth in the study of Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace*.

⁵⁰ Gail Cuthbert Brandt, 'Postmodern Patchwork: Some Recent Trends in the Writing of Women's History in Canada', *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 72, n° 4, 1991), p. 467.

with other forms of power and markers of difference.’⁵¹ Parr thus concluded that gender history ‘begins by acknowledging diversity and instability rather than searching out unity and solidity’, and that identities become ‘severalities, multiple, evocable, scrutable, [...] settled in contingency rather than certainty.’⁵² Therefore, women’s history in Canada seems to have recently evolved into gender history, by which femininity and masculinity become one among many criteria defining an individual, rather than an essentialist quality prescribing the belonging to a group. Consequently, it seems that the concept of ‘limited identities’, and the way in which it undermines the idea of a group organised according to a set of criteria or a particular ideology, in order to favour the study of the individual on his/her own terms, could also have been informed by the precepts of gender history.

Recent Trends in Quebecois Historiography

In Quebec, the process of nation formation and its historical discourse have been complicated by the implications of the fact that Quebec emerges from a doubly complex colonial situation. It is indeed a postcolonial nation, in the sense that it has now severed its political and economic link with France, its mother country, but yet, and in spite of its recent decision not to separate from the Canadian Confederation, Quebec’s inclusion within the latter causes it to still consider itself a colonised nation. Moreover, the Confederation, a result of British colonial presence on the continent, has now gained independence from its imperial centre and is today considered to be a postcolonial country. Quebec, therefore, has to deal with the particular status of being simultaneously a colonial, colonised and postcolonial nation. This specific situation has brought about particular repercussions in the way Quebecois history has been perceived and narrated. In the nineteenth century, historian François-Xavier Garneau, a founding father of French Canadian historical writing, emphasised the need for his fellow *Canadiens français* to remain faithful to themselves, by which he meant to maintain a strong allegiance to their French origins, and to not let themselves be influenced by the possibilities for change available on the continent. His main argument was that French Canada was not strong enough to succeed in matters of social and political innovations, as seen during the ‘failed’ Rebellions of 1837-38. Garneau’s views do testify to an attitude of defiance towards the English occupiers, in reaction to their several attempts at assimilation, and therefore at eradicating the cultural specificity of French Canada, in the course of the nineteenth century;

⁵¹ Joy Parr, *Op. Cit.*, p. 287.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 287-88.

but more importantly, Garneau's views express a strong defeatism when it comes to the chances of the French Canadians successfully surviving in their new environment without a strong allegiance to the ways of the mother country. This attitude illustrates well the paradoxical aspect of the *survivance* paradigm, which advocated simultaneously a resistance towards the British colonial power and a refusal to rebel against it through political change. This position is also very telling of the kind of consequences that Quebec's complex political situation has had on the way its nation has been perceived, and its history narrated, in the past. In the early to mid-twentieth century, Quebecois historians Lionel Groulx and Fernand Ouellet followed on from Garneau and insisted on the assertion of Quebec's distinctiveness: in particular, they 'stressed the manner in which Quebec's evolution had been governed by the distinctive values that its people (more specifically its French-speaking people) had held'.⁵³ This distinctiveness was therefore defined in terms of French language, and Catholic religion, as well as a traditional and rural way of life.

By the 1970s however, and with the advent of the Quiet Revolution, a new generation of Quebecois historians began to emerge, among whom were Paul-André Linteau and Normand Séguin, who brought about a new historical trend which historian Ronald Rudin calls 'revisionism'. Revisionist historians rejected the 'guiding role of the church, the importance of ethnic conflict, and the emphasis upon rural values that had long dominated the literature. They even dispensed with the Conquest as the pivotal event in Quebec history, observing that most political, economic, and social structures were unaffected by what some earlier historians had interpreted as a cataclysm.'⁵⁴ Rudin adds that revisionist historians were motivated by a 'drive for normalcy', by which they tended to focus their attention on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in order to 'find a Quebec that was urbanizing, industrializing, and profoundly divided by class conflicts as were most other Western societies of the time'.⁵⁵

Rudin points out however that this revisionist impetus has led many historians to dismiss the importance of the linguistic and cultural factors which have affected Quebec's nation formation, to the benefit of focusing solely on the economic aspects of Quebec's process of evolution. Rudin suggests that revisionist historians are 'reluctant to admit to the unique aspects of the province's past that might conflict with its new-found image as a

⁵³ Ronald, Rudin, 'Revisionism and the Search for a Normal Society: A Critique of Recent Quebec Historical Writing', *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History*, edited by Marlene Shore (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), p. 237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

modern, vibrant, pluralistic society'.⁵⁶ He gives the example of the conflict between the French-speaking majority and Quebec's various ethnic and linguistic minorities, an emphasis which has been played down so as not to '[clash] with the new self-image of Quebecers as a people open to outsiders'.⁵⁷ Rudin concludes that Quebec historians need to be prepared to 'face up to aspects of their past that [have been] heretofore denied'.⁵⁸ These aspects, however, do not seem to be those revealed by the 'limited identities' approach to the study of history. It is important to note indeed that both revisionist history and its critique do not seem to make any mention of a 'limited identities' approach to Quebecois history. On the contrary, a common feature which seems to emerge through the historical argument for Quebec's 'distinctiveness', and through that for its 'normalcy', is the assumption and the promotion of Quebec as a unified entity, by which it is either 'distinct' or 'normal', but wholly so in either case. It could perhaps be argued that as Quebec does not enjoy the official status of a nation state, its historiography tends to emphasise the ways in which its nation is a unified whole; in this context, it seems the study of Quebec's 'limited identities' could be perceived as potentially 'fragmenting' the Quebecois nation. Therefore, Quebecois history seems to presuppose a unified 'we' which is Quebecois, and which inscribes itself against the historical discourse of Canada.

Rudin's call for Quebecois historians to 'face up to aspects of their past' which have been previously ignored has recently found a positive response through the advent of the comparative approach in Quebecois historiography. This has been a central aspect of recent Quebecois historiography, and has seen Quebecois history compared to that of other nations, such as the Americas or Canada, which seems to reinforce the idea that in Quebec, Canadian history and Quebecois history are perceived as two separate entities. The aim of these comparative studies is to better understand the Quebecois nation, whose analysis is thus not practiced from the inside (as with the 'limited identities' in Canada) but from an outside perspective. Rudin sees these comparative studies as a reaction to Quebecois revisionist historiography, and names historian Gérard Bouchard as one of the main proponents of the comparative historical approach in Quebec. Bouchard has published several works of comparative history through which he has aimed to place Quebecois history in 'a larger context'. He denounces the fact that revisionist historiography has tried to show that Quebecois society has followed a model of evolution similar to that of other American and

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Western societies, in an effort to diminish, or altogether deny, presupposed differences which Quebec would have developed in comparison to the rest of Canada or the United States.⁵⁹ Bouchard's comparative approach, on the other hand, seems to take into account both Quebec's 'normalcy' and its 'specificity', in an effort to offer a critical analysis of the collective representations and definitions set up by Quebec's dominant cultural discourse, by viewing these in the light of other collective experiences from other countries.⁶⁰

In his 2000 work *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde*, Bouchard compares Quebec's history and process of nation formation to that of other collectivities in Latin America, North America and Australasia, while developing the idea of Quebec as 'an old new country'.⁶¹ This illustrates what he sees as the two main contradictory tensions which have affected Quebec's cultural development since the earliest days of the colony: on the one hand the strong cultural link with the mother country, and on the other the fascination with the New World lying nearby, waiting to be explored and colonised.⁶² Bouchard adds that the insertion of Quebec into the New World, and its development into a nation and a minority culture have happened in a context of permanent dependence and adversities, which has turned Quebec into a fragile society always worried about its survival and often tempted to withdraw into itself, as seen during the period of the *survivance*.⁶³ Bouchard also sees Quebec as a hesitating society, which, each time it has had to make a decisive choice, has been confronted by its internal divisions and uncertainties.⁶⁴ This is illustrated by Quebec's several attempts at political independence, some with the use of violence (during the 1837-38 Rebellions) and others with the help of democracy (on the occasions of the two referendums on separation). In each case, it was felt that the failure was linked to a lack of support from the population itself: it is argued indeed that the *Patriotes* would have had a better chance of success in the 1837-38 Rebellions if there had not been some serious internal divisions among them on the issue of the use of violence. Many left the party just before the insurrections as they did not want to be involved in violent action. Moreover, the role that Quebec itself has played in the process of victimisation of some of its own citizens, namely women, is an issue

⁵⁹ Gérard Bouchard, 'Sur les mutations de l'historiographie québécoise: Les chemins de la maturité', *La Société québécoise après 30 ans de changements*, edited by Fernand Dumont (Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, Quebec City, 1990), p. 262.

⁶⁰ Gérard Bouchard, 'Le Québec comme collectivité neuve: Le refus de l'américanité dans le discours de la survivance', *Québécois et Américains: La culture québécoise aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, edited by Gérard Bouchard and Yvan Lamonde (Fides, Montreal, 1995), p. 51.

⁶¹ Gérard Bouchard, *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 2000), p. 77. My translation.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

which Anne Hébert addresses on several occasions throughout her literary career, as will be shown in later chapters. It also raises the idea that the Quebecois are responsible for some of Quebec's internal divisions, and therefore for not succeeding in improving their political situation, a view which is not in keeping with the claims of the Quiet Revolution and with that of revisionist history.

Quebec's old but never achieved dream of sovereignty leads Bouchard to think that, generally, its history on the American continent has been marked by traumatism and political humiliations. These, over a long period of time, have prompted its population to feed on what Bouchard calls 'depressing myths', myths which were set in place by the paradigm of the *survivance* and, according to Bouchard, which were only partially destroyed during the Quiet Revolution.⁶⁵ These myths are also tied in with nineteenth-century French Canada's general pessimism and defeatism regarding its potential capacity to achieve any form of original creativity with success. In this respect, the writings of François-Xavier Garneau once again come to mind, influential as they were in the nineteenth century in dissuading French Canadians to attempt any political, social or cultural transformations. This attitude was also typically linked to the depreciation of local cultural productions, a trend which the Quiet Revolution set about undermining but, according to Bouchard, not entirely successfully. He points out indeed how the intense and tormented cultural link with the mother country has had deep inhibiting and repressing effects which Quebec never really got over.⁶⁶ In particular when it comes to language, Bouchard explains that contemporary Quebec is still struggling with the dispute over the linguistic *norm* (French? International? Québécoise?). He adds that Quebec today is just emerging from a period during which its vision of the New World has been shadowed by that of the Old one.⁶⁷ One might disagree with Bouchard however when looking at the repeated attempts at recognising the importance and the cultural value of Quebec's local places, people and customs which Anne Hébert has shown in her work. The process of cultural legitimisation and celebration in which she is engaged will be examined in more depth in later chapters, but testifies to a different approach than Bouchard's representation of the nation.

It might be interesting to note that the trend of de-valorisation of local cultures which Bouchard notices took place up until the 1960s in Quebec, was also present in the rest of the Confederation up until the same period. Margaret Atwood spoke on that issue on the

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

occasion of the 1986 International P.E.N. Congress which had for its topic 'Contemporary History, as Reflected in Contemporary Literature'.⁶⁸ In her address she described the problems and dilemmas which faced Canadian writers when they attempted to situate themselves, their characters, or their work in relation to history, that of their own country or that of others. Atwood explained how she had first-hand experience of what it meant to be part of a small colonial, ex-colonial, or colonised society, overshadowed by a larger imperial one. Growing up in such a society had meant for Atwood to be cut off from one's own history, and in consequence from one's own culture. As a reaction to this, she became quite interested in her past and felt compelled to excavate and dig up what had been buried and forgotten. For the Canadian writer, she concluded, history is something that must be re-discovered, re-claimed and re-interpreted, an attitude which both she and Anne Hébert have adopted on many occasions throughout their literary careers. One thus notices an obvious similarity in the processes of cultural de-valorisation found in Quebec and in the rest of the Confederation. The differences lie, perhaps, in the ways in which these depreciations have been dealt with and in the consequences they have had for each nation: while Quebec is still struggling, in Bouchard's words, to get over the deeply inhibiting and repressing effects of its intense and tormented link with the mother country, the rest of Canada seems to have been able to assert its cultural independence and international recognition.

Finally, Bouchard confirms his opposition to the idea that Quebec's history should be integrated into the wider frame of Canadian history and form a dissident, minor segment of the latter. He maintains that Quebec should be studied on its own terms and invokes several 'empirical' facts which according to him justify this opinion: the Anglophone/Francophone duality in Canada, which has always been present and which is exemplified by the differences of language, religion, and custom; the very dense and coherent chain of events linking seventeenth-century New-France to contemporary Quebec, a chain of events which is anterior to English Canadian history; and the singularity and 'vigour' of the Francophone/Quebécois community in its continuous ideological discourse about emancipation, in its long tradition of political and constitutional struggle, in the deep-rootedness of its inhabitants in the territory of the St Lawrence, in the persistence of their strong collective identity and sense of belonging, and in the expression of a national imagination in historiography, literature, and the arts in

⁶⁸ Margaret Atwood chaired one of the four literary sessions held on the topic of 'Contemporary History, as Reflected in Contemporary Literature'. The address she gave on that occasion is filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers, at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. This address is an unpublished manuscript, and therefore only indirect references to the text will be possible.

general.⁶⁹ For Bouchard, these facts justify the existence of a distinct nation in Quebec. He recognises however that parallel to this there is another nation in formation: Canada, with its diverse ethnic components, among which is the Francophone community.⁷⁰

Ironically, Bouchard's attitude, while denouncing the ambivalences and contradictions which have plagued the Quebecois nation in the past, seems to reinforce these same problems. Indeed, he prescribes that Quebecois history should exist and be studied distinctively from the history of the Confederation, an approach which in itself requires some negotiating, while simultaneously agreeing that the Quebecois community is one of the many components of the Confederation. Surely, advocating that Quebec should at the same time be studied on its own and as part of Canadian history is a way of reinforcing Quebec's ambivalent and divided status? Once again, the role that Quebec itself has played in its own process of victimisation and division in the past is an issue which will be addressed in later chapters through the study of some of Anne Hébert's work. Moreover, it also becomes apparent that Bouchard's aim in comparing Quebec to other 'new collectivities' is to understand its failure to achieve sovereignty, which these other collectivities have attained. This seems to be the agenda behind Bouchard's comparative approach, an approach whose claim to a greater objectivity thus appears to be misconceived. Rudin concludes indeed that historians do 'colour' their writings with their beliefs, and that the use of a comparative approach should not conceal from the reader the fundamentally subjective nature of historiography.⁷¹

It is also significant to note that the important political role which Quebecois women have played during the Quiet Revolution has not been recognised in Quebecois history. Quebecois historian Micheline Dumont has denounced the exclusion of women from the narratives of the nationalist discourse and, consequently, from that of national history. Dumont points out that 1970s Quebec's two major intellectual movements, namely the nationalist and the feminist movement, should be integrated into a single narrative line. She sees the fact that this is not the case as being due to the general tendency to see women in 'biological' terms, to identify the 'homo quebecensis' as male, to refuse the status of historical subject to women, to value a demographic approach in the vision of the nation's

⁶⁹ Gérard Bouchard, *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 78-79.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79. One notices that Bouchard's recognition of the 'Francophone component' within the Canadian nation seems to be in keeping with the concept of the 'limited identities' in use in contemporary Canadian historiography. Bouchard however does not seem to apply this concept to the study of Quebecois history.

⁷¹ Ronald Rudin, 'Le Rôle de l'histoire comparée dans l'historiographie québécoise', *À Propos de l'histoire nationale*, edited by Robert Comeau and Bernard Dionne (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1998), p. 113.

future, and to consider the issues raised by Feminism as 'foreign'.⁷² Dumont also explains that the women's movement emerged during the 1960s in Quebec and ideologically associated women's liberation from patriarchal order in domestic, economic and social institutions with the cause of national liberation.⁷³ However, the nationalist discourse of the Quiet Revolution promoted an essentially male ideal, where women's roles were often characterized as passive and simplistic, and where women's representation was stereotyped, outmoded and alienating.⁷⁴ This was due in part to the fact that the nationalist discourse emphasised the necessity for the nation of women's legal subordination in the context of their central role in the *revanche des berceaux* (revenge of the cradles). This latter concept had been developed in the aftermath of the failed Rebellions of 1837-38 and through the paradigm of *survivance*, in which the submission to the governing authority and the idealization of the large rural family became essential. In Dumont's words, according to the dominant ideology, it was women's fecundity and virtue which had saved the nation.⁷⁵ These ideals clearly clashed with the recognition of women as active participants in the nationalist discourse, and therefore in the history of the nation. Dumont asks why women's involvement in Quebecois nationalism is not mentioned in mainstream histories, and why there is no emphasis of the fact that Quebecois nationalism has been constructed along gender lines. She concludes that the omission of women's political actions in history contributes to the denial of their historical roles, an injustice which both Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert address and denounce through their writings.⁷⁶

It is interesting to note however that some of the discriminations encountered by Quebecois women's groups in the first half of the twentieth century were self-imposed. Dumont gives the example of the posters produced by the *Ligue des Droits de la femme* and explains how they differed from their English counterparts: in the French version, words such as 'Equality' and 'Justice' were purposely left out by the group leader, while on those posters which dealt with women's right to work it was specified, in French, 'for those women who have to work'.⁷⁷ These differences of opinion progressively created a rift between French and English-Canadian women's movements. Dumont also points out how in 1907 the first Quebecois feminists 'separated' from their Canadian 'colleagues', partly for nationalist

⁷² Micheline Dumont, 'L'Histoire nationale peut-elle intégrer la réflexion féministe sur l'histoire?', *À Propos de l'histoire nationale*, edited by Robert Comeau and Bernard Dionne (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1998), p. 36.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

reasons: indeed, the collaboration between both groups had become uneasy, with the Anglo-Canadians being accused of imperialism and openly despising the 'papists' and the 'inferior races'.⁷⁸ Dumont adds that the depreciative approach to Quebecois nationalism in English Canada has influenced English-Canadian historical writing and the way in which it has perceived Quebecois women's movements.⁷⁹ It thus seems that the inclusion of women in Quebecois history has encountered resistance from the Quebecois (male) nationalist discourse and from women themselves in previous generations, and has suffered the consequences of the rift in political views between Quebec and the rest of Canada. This in turn has prevented a union between English-Canadian and Quebecois Feminisms, and has made it generally difficult for Quebecois women to assert their place in Quebecois/Canadian society and history. Quebec's victimisation of some of its own citizens is exemplified by this and, as said before, will be vividly illustrated by some of Anne Hébert's work.

It seems also that Dumont does not prescribe a 'limited identities' approach to the study and inclusion of women in (Quebecois) history; she rather advocates the recognition of Quebecois women as a group of people united by a common discrimination, and a common exclusion from the historical records of their nation. This appears to define a common political agenda for these women: claiming their place in national history. Possibly, the way in which Quebecois women's historians perceive this female group has affinities with the notion of 'subaltern', which refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. The term was originally adopted by Antonio Gramsci who was interested in the history of the 'subaltern classes', in opposition to the history of the ruling classes which is realised in the state, history being the history of states and dominant groups.⁸⁰ Therefore, there seem to be two distinct approaches to the study and recognition of Canada's multitude of minorities: in contrast to the 'limited identities' approach practiced in English Canada, Quebecois historians seem to prefer the notion of subaltern groups. The difference between both concepts seems to be that where the 'limited identities' approach tends to recognise and study people in their individuality, the notion of 'subaltern' suggests the grouping of people around specific criteria, or agendas. However, although using distinct ideologies, both concepts seek to recognise minority individuals or groups which are not represented in hegemonic historical narratives. Moreover, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971), p. 52.

warned against the dangers of writing subaltern history in her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?': she denounces the essentialist nature of the notion of 'subaltern', which she sees as a group defined by its difference from the elite. Spivak then goes on to examine the problems caused by the category of the subaltern in the particular case of Indian women, for '[w]ithin the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced'.⁸¹ She adds that 'both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.'⁸² This observation seems to fit the situation of Quebecois women, and is in keeping with Dumont's earlier claim that Quebecois national history and its discourse have been constructed along gender lines, a fact which, she feels, needs to be acknowledged. Spivak concludes that if 'the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow', a problem which contemporary Quebecois women's historians are also raising.⁸³ As will be illustrated in this thesis, giving a voice to the (female) subaltern is a central concern of both Atwood's and Hébert's work, and it will be shown in particular how both authors attempt to create a (historical) space in which the subjugated female figure can be heard.

Conclusion

The homogenised and uniform national narratives which were predominant in the early 1960s have given way to the recognition of Canada's multitude of diversities and the need to acknowledge the roles these have played in its process of nation formation. As will be seen in following chapters, Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert both take this need into account in their work, and in particular the concept of 'limited identities', as advocated by Cook and Careless, proves essential in understanding both authors' intentions in the works under study in this thesis. Indeed, the recognition of women's important roles in the past, and in particular the re-writing of the lives of some contentious female characters, is well in keeping with the idea of looking at history in the detail of the gender, class and ethnic groups of its different actors. However, recent claims have condemned this historical approach and have accused it of being responsible for the 'dis-integration' of Canada's history; as a result, some feel today that Canada is facing an intense constitutional crisis. The present study will strive to reveal the ways in which these national concerns have found echoes in the creative work of the two

⁸¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1994), p. 82.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

female artists. Through a selection of literary texts by Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert, it will be shown how both authors' respective efforts at historical re-writing manage to define a historical space which, in spite of the marked cultural and linguistic differences between them, seems to create a cultural connection between Quebec and Canada.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Chapter Two:

Re-Interpreting Canada's Past

in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

This chapter will examine Margaret Atwood's 1970 poem cycle *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, paying particular attention to the ways in which the poet goes back to and re-writes the life of the English pioneer gentlewoman who settled in the Canadian colonies in the nineteenth century. Susanna Moodie is today considered one of Canada's first literary authors, and her two famous works *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and its sequel *Life in the Clearings* (1853) have become classics in Canadian literature, even though they exist 'in the curious middle ground between fiction and non-fiction'.¹ The two works are miscellaneous collections of personal impressions, character sketches, passages of romantic description, anecdotes, short stories and even poems describing the hardships experienced by early settlers in the New World and the social customs and practices of Canadian society as it was emerging at the time. In the afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Margaret Atwood explains how she read both books, but was 'disappointed. The prose was discursive and ornamental and the books had little shape: they were collections of disconnected anecdotes.'² She adds that the poems occurred later, and that although 'they have detached themselves from the books', their arrangement 'follows, more or less, the course of Mrs Moodie's life'.³ In this context, it seems relevant to give a brief outline of the latter: Susanna Moodie emigrated to Canada in 1832 with her husband and first settled in the backwoods near Cobourg, Upper Canada. After seven years of enduring many hardships and failures in the bush, the Moodies decided to abandon farming and eventually moved to the town of Belleville in 1840, from where Susanna wrote the sketches and stories of backwoods life that would eventually become her *Roughing It in the Bush*. She remained in Belleville until her husband's death in 1869, and then moved to Toronto where she lived until her own death in 1885.

¹ W. J. Keith, *Canadian Literature in English, Op. Cit.*, pp. 20-21.

² Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Afterword (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1970), p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Atwood's poems are divided into three sections of nine poems each: 'Journal I, 1832-1840' deals with Susanna Moodie's first arrival in Canada and encounter with its wilderness; 'Journal II, 1840-1871' spans the period in which the Moodies lived in Belleville until John's death in 1869 and the few years thereafter; 'Journal III, 1871-1969' covers the last years of Susanna's life, her death and imagined resurrection in modern-day Toronto. Interestingly, the poems are meant to encompass the period of time from Susanna Moodie's arrival in the colony up until their own moment of publication, in 1970. Their scope is thus the life and after-life of Susanna Moodie in Canada, as seen through the impact that her literary legacy has had over the years on the formation of Canada's national and cultural consciousness. This chapter will focus on Atwood's representation of the nineteenth-century pioneer gentlewoman as found in her poems, and more specifically on the ways in which Atwood sees Moodie's vision to have been affected and shaped by her contact with the wilderness. We will then move on to what Atwood sees as an important factor influencing the formation of the Canadian nation: the fact that most of its people were once immigrants, and that they have had to negotiate the difficult relinquishment of their mother country. The division and fragmentation which, according to Atwood, this has brought about within Moodie's sense of self will be examined, together with the use of imagery drawing from the Gothic mode to express this self-division and fragmentation. Atwood's successive re-visitations of Susanna Moodie's work will also be mentioned, with an emphasis on the various authorial intentions behind each attempt. Finally, we will look at other instances in which Atwood has used a similar process of re-writing the lives of female figures from the past.

'Speaking' the Wilderness

At the heart of Atwood's intentions when composing her poem cycle is the attempt to reveal the missing gaps in Moodie's version, gaps which, according to Atwood, have made it difficult for Canadians to define themselves, their culture and their sense of belonging to the land subsequently. She explains indeed in her afterword how many of the poems 'were suggested by Mrs Moodie's books, though it was not her conscious voice but the other voice running like a counterpoint through her work that made the most impression on me.'⁴ Atwood attributes that 'other voice' to Moodie's inability to express certain aspects of her experience in the colony and to the fact that her set of (European) references was challenged

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

by, and felt to be inadequate in, the New World. Atwood thus tries to remedy those fractures in Moodie's narratives by imagining what her real train of thought might have been like. Her aims for doing so also fit into the larger framework of 1970s Canada's cultural revolution, where the need to define a national Canadian consciousness, a literary tradition and literary ancestors became crucial. Atwood shows the necessity of celebrating what is local and of legitimising the existence of Canada on its own terms, rather than having it judged against European criteria, as she feels Moodie did in the past. For that purpose, she places a strong emphasis on what she recognises to be Canadian specificities, such as the important role played by the wilderness, Canadians' perpetual immigrant status, the establishment of relations between very diverse ethnic groups, as well as urbanisation and progress, and the destruction both brought about.⁵

In particular, Atwood represents the missing gaps in Moodie's version and the difficult relationship with the Canadian landscape by using the recurring motif of foreign language and communication breakdown as a way to illustrate Moodie's sense of alienation and dislocation at her first contact with the New World, and the subsequent self-censoring attitude she adopts in her writings. This is clearly visible in the poem 'Disembarking at Quebec', where the newly arrived Moodie is contrasted to '[t]he others' who 'leap, shout/ Freedom!'. Moodie, on the other hand, notices that 'this space cannot hear', and that '[t]he moving water will not show me/ my reflection', before concluding: 'I am a word/ in a foreign language.'⁶ This statement powerfully encapsulates the breakdown in communication experienced by the settler when faced with a totally unfamiliar surrounding. Moodie's feeling of isolation is emphasised here: while others shout 'Freedom' and embrace the potential for change available on the new continent, in keeping with the precepts of the discourse of the *américanité*, as defined in 1960s Canada, Moodie is seen as both holding back and as being unable to recognise herself in this New World: the moving water will not show her her reflection.

Moodie also testifies to the difficult lack of language and to the need for naming one's environment, this 'space [which] cannot hear'. This becomes a central trope in the poem sequence, where the strangeness of the land and of the beings inhabiting it is emphasised by

⁵ Patrick Lane speaks of the 'sudden recognition of place' readers are shocked with in Atwood's work: '[w]ho we were became legitimate within the framework of art, an articulated present that questioned what had gone before, and questioned what was to come.' Patrick Lane, 'The Unyielding Phrase', *Op. Cit.*, p. 60. The notion of questioning the past so as to envisage the future is particularly pertinent in the study of Atwood's poem sequence.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1970), p. 11. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

the absence of linguistic tools with which to apprehend both. Linda Hutcheon, in the chapter of *The Canadian Postmodern* she dedicates to the study of Atwood's work, notices that in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, language is 'both the vehicle of exploration and the site of combat; its limitations and powers become metafictional obsessions'.⁷ The self-reflexive and self-conscious nature of this particular vision of language, as well as the political purposes it carries, make Hutcheon conclude that the poem cycle 'offers a poetic version of historiographic metafiction', as defined earlier.⁸ Similarly, the beliefs and instinctive knowledge Moodie brought from her homeland are confronted and challenged by this situation of 'non-knowledge', which in turn gives her the impression that she has become a foreign element: 'I am a word/ in a foreign language'. As a result, Moodie is described as being estranged from her new environment, but also as becoming a stranger to her own self, which possibly explains why, according to Atwood, she left so much of her personal vision unsaid. Critic Susan Johnston notices how in this poem the landscape is endowed with volition, in that it has a power of refusal which 'can only inhere in an autonomous subject'.⁹ Johnston adds that in refusing to reflect and re-assert the human ego, the 'phenomenal world has reduced [Moodie] to the role of signifier, a "word", not even comprehensible', a reduction which involves 'an interesting inversion of traditional landscape aesthetics, in which [traditionally] the ultimate referent for the signifying landscape is [...] the human ego.'¹⁰

Moreover, the imagery of linguistic foreignness and language alienation, as set in the context of an arrival in Quebec City, does remind one of the struggle 1960s Canada was facing with the claims of language duality and national assertion in Quebec. In this context, the sense of dislocation experienced by Moodie could have a more contemporary referent and be an allusion to the similar sense of alienation denounced by the Quebecois during the Quiet Revolution. It is possible therefore that Atwood's metaphor uses a modern referent to address a nineteenth-century event, so as to emphasise, perhaps, the long lasting effect of that event and the continuity of its influence. It seems Atwood argues that Moodie's first contact with the land and the way in which she subsequently wrote about it have had major consequences on Canadians' relationship to their country and to themselves up until the present of the late 1960s, when the poems were being written and published. Once again, the 1960s marked a period during which a heightened sense of nationalism prompted Canadians to assert

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Op. Cit., p. 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁹ Susan Johnston, 'Reconstructing the Wilderness: Margaret Atwood's Reading of Susanna Moodie', *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* (Vol. 31, 1992), p. 39.

themselves culturally and to address the importance the landscape had had on the formation of the national 'psyche'. Atwood points out in her afterword that 'what struck [her] most about [Susanna Moodie's] personality was the way in which it reflects many of the obsessions still with us', obsessions which Atwood feels it is her role to denounce and explain in her poem cycle.¹¹

The imagery of (foreign) language as associated with the alien landscape comes up again in the poem 'First Neighbours', with the added element of the antagonism between Susanna Moodie, the new settler, and those who already are in the colony, 'unforgivingly/ previous to [her]', with their 'twisted dialect to [her] differently-/ shaped ears' (p. 14). The difficult relationships between the successive waves of pioneers comes under examination here, in an attempt to reveal the complex set of class and gender issues which have affected the formation of Canada's society. The 'twisted dialect' spoken by the previous settlers told Moodie of class distinctions not applying in the New World, where members of the working-class could acquire land and status, thus becoming the equals of the landed gentry. The New World also spoke of hard physical work which had to be carried out by men and women alike, in contradiction to the gender divide Moodie would have been used to in pre-Victorian England. Once again, her 'differently-/ shaped ears' cannot understand this 'dialect', and the values it asserts challenge her own set of European-based beliefs. From this discrepancy come the gaps and the 'unsaid' of Moodie's version. Of course, one set of settlers in particular could also be alluded to here, a group which was especially active in the 1960s in the assertion of their anteriority on the Canadian soil: the French-Canadian community. The latter was actually in the process of spiritually retreating to the territory of Quebec where they were to adopt a 'Quebecois' identity; this can be seen as another example of the way in which the land has shaped the consciousness of the people inhabiting it. In Moodie's case however, her first contact with the wilderness means lack of belonging and failure; in Atwood's poem she admits her difficulty with negotiating the 'drizzle/ of strange meaning', thus equating language to an unknown climate, and concludes that her 'damaged/ knowing of the language means/ prediction is forever impossible' (p. 15).

Nevertheless, Atwood chooses to represent an eventual process of familiarisation and acceptance regarding Moodie and her alien surrounding. In 'Visit to Toronto, with Companions', Atwood is able to envisage a much more positive relationship to the land for Moodie, once again, through the theme of language. Moodie describes her visit to the new

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Afterword, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62.

Toronto lunatic asylum, where she sees the female patients: some are ‘sitting, sewing’, while others are ‘crouching, thrashing, tearing off their clothes, screaming’ (p. 50). On the last floor of the institution however, Moodie goes into ‘a different kind of room./ It was a hill, with boulders, trees, no houses’ (p. 50). Oddly, therefore, Moodie metaphorically leaves the new asylum, symbol of progress and civilisation, and the locus where the ‘mad’ female subject is contained, in order to contemplate ‘[t]he landscape [which] was saying something’, while ‘the air/ was about to tell [her]/ all kinds of answers’ (p. 51). This association of Nature with language does not bring about the sense of loss, confusion and division which the imagery had conjured up in previous poems. In Atwood’s version, the visit to the Toronto lunatic asylum takes place towards the end of Moodie’s life, at a time when she has been in Canada for at least forty years.¹² Moodie’s eventual sense of familiarity with the land is visible in the way in which she is represented as symbolically interrupting her tour of the female patients, the attraction she has come to see, to ponder over deeper questions relating to the meaning of the wilderness. The latter is no longer threatening or aggressively foreign, on the contrary it is ‘saying something’ to her, and is ‘about to tell [her]/ all kinds of answers’. The landscape seems to be finally making sense to Moodie, unlike the female patients of the asylum who, through their incoherent behaviour, question traditional nineteenth-century understandings of female conduct.¹³ Interestingly therefore, the poem seems to highlight the feeling of harmony, if not belonging, that Moodie experiences towards the land, by juxtaposing it and contrasting it to her non-understanding of the puzzling behaviour of the female patients.

Ultimately, it is also possible that Atwood’s Moodie is able to relate to the latter: she declares seeing ‘three faces’ which appear ‘[a]bove [her], at eye level’ in the landscape, and who tell her to go see the advent of progress and modernity in the city, such as ‘the Toronto harbour’ (p. 51). Moodie resists this hallucination however, and shows that she prefers listening to what the landscape has to tell her. This attitude, together with the Nature/civilisation duality, presents us with a Moodie somewhat altered by her experience of life in Canada and seemingly more willing to embrace the land, instead of opposing it for the benefit of progress. R.P. Bilan notices that, in this poem, Moodie is ‘apparently “mad”’ as ‘there is certainly a suggestion of controlled madness in her seemingly inappropriate gesture:

¹² The poem belongs to Journal III, which is dated ‘1871-1969’, while Susanna Moodie first arrived in Canada in 1832.

¹³ Atwood’s treatment of the theme of female madness, and in particular of its nineteenth-century (prejudiced) perception will be examined more in depth in the chapter on *Alias Grace*.

“I sat down and smoothed my gloves””.¹⁴ Bilan adds that this ‘madness’ is ‘as close to a breakthrough as to a breakdown’, while Moodie ‘encounters, or rather, imagines she encounters, the land, the wilderness now excluded by the city.’¹⁵ We see another important theme emerging here, one which, according to Atwood, is particularly relevant to Canada: the tension between encouraging modernisation and preventing the destruction of the natural landscape, an issue deeply at the heart of Atwood’s work and which gains more momentum as the poem cycle reaches its conclusion. In ‘Visit to Toronto, with Companions’ however, Moodie is not silenced anymore, she seems to be reconciled with the different tensions affecting her vision and able to voice the missing gaps in her narrative (as in confessing to having a hallucination).

Moreover, the effects of Atwood’s re-writing process are visible in this poem through the fact that in the original episode of Moodie’s actual visit to the Toronto lunatic asylum, as found in her *Life in the Clearings*, her tone is one of pity and horror at the behaviour of the ‘female lunatics’ and at ‘the terrible idea of madness [she] had been wont to entertain’.¹⁶ In Atwood’s (re-imagined) version however, she makes Moodie less judgemental and more inclined, it seems, to relate to the experience of the female patients and, consequently, to that of the land.¹⁷ Therefore, this vision’s inherent questioning of nineteenth-century values regarding the management of the female body seems to be linked to a similar questioning of the pioneer’s relationship to the land; both seem to underline the settler’s (and future generations of Canadians’) need to detach herself from her rigid European beliefs and criteria. The latter seem indeed to have been obstacles in Canadians’ relationship to their environment, as denounced by the discourse of the *américanité* which advocated the welcoming of the potential for change available on the new continent, at the expense of the suffocating link with the mother country.

As the poem sequence reaches its end, Atwood depicts Moodie as increasingly at ease within the wilderness and also increasingly concerned with the negative effects of man’s intervention. In ‘Alternate Thoughts From Underground’, Susanna Moodie is dead and

¹⁴ R.P. Bilan, ‘Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*’, *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* (Vol. 2, 1978), p. 10, quoting from Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Susanna Moodie, *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (originally published by Richard Bentley in London, England, 1853; the present edition is the New Canadian Library edition, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1989), p. 265.

¹⁷ Moreover, the original episode of Moodie’s actual visit to the Toronto lunatic asylum, as found in her *Life in the Clearings*, is also where Atwood first came across the story of Grace Marks, which she would later use for her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*. Therefore, this same episode inspired another re-writing attempt on the part of Atwood, as will be discussed in the section on Atwood’s later re-visitations of Susanna Moodie’s writings.

buried, yet she hears 'the shrill of glass and steel' made by the 'inheritors, the raisers/ of glib superstructures' (p. 57). Moodie deplores the process of urbanisation set in place by her descendants, the 'inheritors', while the poem urges them to take heed of the destruction they have caused, a theme central to *Journal III*. The damage done by the colonisers to the wilderness is also linked to the treatment of 'those for whom/ shelter was wood,/ fire was terror and sacred' (p. 57). This evocation of the Native people emphasises their Nature-friendly customs and way of life: 'wood' is contrasted to the 'glass and still' used by modern-day Canadians, while the reference to the (lost) sacredness of fire could be an allusion to the devastation brought about by the age of energy-based petrol consumption and nuclear warfare.

Finally, the last poem of the cycle, 'A Bus Along St Clair: December', features Susanna Moodie as an old woman on a bus in contemporary Toronto; the poem vividly encapsulates the contrast and tensions between Moodie's nineteenth-century European values, her experience of the wilderness as a settler, and her eventual acceptance and protection of the landscape.¹⁸ She illustrates her British colonial beliefs by declaring that Canada 'is [her] kingdom still', while confessing that 'the snow/ is no more familiar/ to you than it was to me:/ this is my doing' (p. 60). It seems Atwood attempts to reveal the impact Moodie's perception of the landscape has had on subsequent generations of Canadians: through the image of the snow, symbolic of the long and harsh Canadian winters, she links Moodie's bewilderment and inability to cope with the hardships caused by the wilderness to, according to Atwood, the similar bewilderment experienced by Canadians today in relation to their land. There is something almost jubilant in Moodie's tone here, as if she was proud of the disruptive effect she has had on her descendants. But while recognising her role in maintaining Canada's difficult relationship to its wilderness, Moodie also asserts her will to protect it against destruction in the form of urbanisation and progress: 'out of [my] eyes come secret/ hatpins, destroying/ the walls, the ceiling' of the bus, a symbol of the urban, polluted city (p. 61). Moodie concludes:

Turn, look down:
there is no city;

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the 'St Clair' in the title refers to St Clair Avenue in Toronto, a piece of geographical knowledge which might not have been obvious to the non-Canadian reader, but yet, which he or she is expected to possess. This seems to indicate an attempt on the part of the author to celebrate the 'local' and to encourage the 'recognition of place' mentioned by Patrick Lane earlier. A similar attitude will also be encountered in the work of Anne Hébert, where a special emphasis is placed upon the small-scale, local knowledge of places and customs.

this is the centre of a forest

your place is empty (p. 61)

These words close the poem sequence on a sinister and ominous note: Moodie both reduces the advent of progress and civilisation to nothing ('there is no city') and re-establishes the predominance and anteriority of the wilderness ('the centre of a forest'), while contrasting 'city' to 'forest'. However, her last line seems to contradict both previous ones: whether it be a thriving urban city or a dense and wild forest, 'empty' is not the adjective which comes to mind. The word 'empty', which negates the existence of any human, animal or plant life form, together with the transition from 'my kingdom' to 'your place', seems to illustrate Moodie's powerful denunciation and disapproval of what her 'inheritors' have done with the land. She accuses modern-day Canadians of not having been able to protect their past, and shows them how, consequently, no future is possible: they will have 'no city'. This is a call from Atwood, through Moodie, for Canadians to open their eyes and 'look down' at the remaining wilderness, as only through this renewed awareness of their surroundings will they be able to build a future for themselves. R.P. Bilan notices that in this last poem, the 'pattern of reversal is completed', as 'it is not nature which is seen as threatening, but the city – "an unexplored/ wilderness of wires"'.¹⁹ Bilan adds that Moodie's destructive stance shows how she is now breaking the 'boundaries and order she once supported. She has at last, as Atwood remarks, "become the spirit of the land she once hated."' ²⁰

'We Are All Immigrants to This Place'

Another important factor which has shaped Canadians' lives up to the 'present' day of 1970, according to Atwood, is the fact that Canada was originally a settlement colony. This has had repercussions in two distinct ways: the mother country the settlers originally came from has haunted and affected their perception of the new land up until today, while the process of transformation having taken place within these settlers as they got used to living on the new territory has gone unnoticed, in Atwood's opinion.²¹ Yet, this double and simultaneous process has brought about the sense of fragmentation and division which Atwood recognises

¹⁹ R.P. Bilan, 'Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 12, quoting from Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 60.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12, quoting from Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Afterword, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

in Moodie's writings – the gaps and tensions between the said and the 'unsaid' – and which make her come to the conclusion that 'Moodie is divided down the middle [...]. Perhaps that is the way we still live. We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders.'²² Atwood thus uses and re-writes the life experiences of Susanna Moodie so as to emphasise the important factors which she sees as having affected Canada up until the present day. In the context of 1960s Canada, hers is also a call for change: by insisting on those aspects of Canadian life which are specific to the country and its people, Atwood is able to define a collective 'we' whose common features help raise a sense of national consciousness.

This is operated through the poems' description of the deep feelings of nostalgia for their homelands experienced by the new settlers and, later, by immigrants to the country. In 'First Neighbours', Atwood has Moodie notice how 'England/ was now unreachable, had sunk down into the sea/ without ever teaching me about washtubs' (p. 14). Moodie mourns her home country while feeling resentment at the incomplete knowledge it left her with. The inadequacy of the set of British middle-class values which Moodie brought to the new land is emphasised but also associated with melancholy for the country which has 'sunk down into the sea'. This ambivalent position is further illustrated by the poem 'The Immigrants', where Atwood conjures up the difficult situation of new immigrants to Canada whose presence is not welcomed ('someone/ [...] wants to kill them' (p. 32)), but yet, who cannot return to their native lands. They become in-between entities, belonging neither to the 'here' of the new country nor to the 'there' of the mother country, where, if they return, 'their tongues/ stumble among awkward teeth, their ears/ are filled with the sound of breaking glass' (p. 33). The motif of foreign language is used here to illustrate the gap between the immigrants and their fellow countrymen back home by featuring a breakdown in communication ('the sound of breaking glass'). This also accounts for the progressive process of transformation which occurs in the New World.

Interestingly, Atwood also touches on the immigrants' attempt at starting afresh and at creating a new beginning: 'they think they will make an order/ like the old one, sow miniature orchards,/ carve children and flocks out of wood' (p. 32). The immigrants' 'miniature orchards' remind one of the 'first garden' planted by Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet in Anne

²¹ Carol Shields also noticed that Moodie's 'intense nineteenth-century patriotism made the parting from her homeland painful', and that '[a]lthough she never returned to England, in a sense she never left.' Carol Shields, *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* (Borealis Press, Ottawa, 1997), p. 68.

Hébert's *Le Premier jardin*. That novel will be looked at in depth in Chapter Six, but suffice to say that the importance of the model of the mother country's 'old' order for the new beginning is emphasised by both authors. However, where Hébert makes allowance for the process of adaptation which took place in the 'first garden' over the years, Atwood's view is more bleak, as she insists on the failure of the immigrants to reproduce the ways of their mother country: 'the green fruit shrivels/ in the prairie sun, wood is for burning' (p. 33). When settlers rigidly follow the precepts of the Old World, the orchards yield no fruit and no children or cattle can thrive on the land; the outcome is sterility. Patrick Lane observes that, for Atwood, 'the immigrants imposed upon Canada a European consciousness, refusing to give up the baggage of their past'.²³ He adds that Atwood denounces the fact that they carried 'an alien history and imposed it upon Eden, corrupting and destroying a possible innocence', while concluding that her work promotes 'a refusal of the past in favour of the present, a new beginning, another Canada.'²⁴

Canada's 'new beginning', according to Atwood, depends upon the reconciliation with the specificity of one's environment and the perception of one's surrounding on its own terms, and not against some inadequate European-based criteria. Atwood illustrates what she sees as this necessary process of adaptation through the striking metaphor of Susanna Moodie being 'animalised' through her contact with the wilderness. This becomes a recurrent theme in the poem sequence, expressed early on when Moodie confesses that she needs 'wolf's eyes to see/ the truth' and that her 'brain gropes nervous/ tentacles in the night' (p. 13). This process of transformation is underlined by Gothic undertones expressing the fear that the human body dissolves and loses its boundaries when confronted with the natural world; the use of this Gothic imagery will be explored in the following section of this chapter. Atwood sets up here a 'human versus wilderness' dichotomy which offers a framework within which other conflicts can be played out, such as the opposition between Nature and civilisation, but also, ultimately, that between knowledge (both intellectual and sensorial) and ignorance. Moodie is indeed both aware of being insufficiently equipped for survival in the New World, but yet shows resistance towards the powers of transformation and knowledge it has to offer. Time and time again, she comments on the darkness of her ignorance in the bush: '[w]e [...] entered a large darkness./ It was our own/ ignorance we entered' (p. 12), while upon leaving the backwoods, in 'Departure From the Bush', she notices '[t]here was something [the

²² Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Afterword, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62.

²³ Patrick Lane, 'The Unyielding Phrase', *Op. Cit.*, p. 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

wilderness] almost taught me/ I came away not having learned' (p. 27). The traditional supremacy of civilisation over the natural world is counterbalanced by Atwood who emphasises the importance of the latter, and shows how Moodie's 'darkness' is fraught with the imperfect knowledge she brought with her from Europe. As a consequence, Moodie is left divided and fragmented, both afraid of her 'animalisation' and encouraging it: she wonders how her husband will find her once she has been changed by 'the fox eye, the owl/ eye, the eightfold/ eye of the spider' (p. 19), then notices how 'the animals/ arrived to inhabit [her]' but she 'was not ready/ altogether to be moved into' (p. 26), before finally declaring that 'with new/ formed plumage/ uncorroded/ gold and/ Fiery green, [her] fingers/ curving and scaled' she will 'prowl and slink' after her death (p. 49). Just as Moodie finds herself more capable of understanding the language of the wilderness towards the end of her life, she also seems to be more willing to embrace its potential for change, here read in terms of 'animalisation', when in old age.

In the poem 'Charivari', however, Atwood gives an example of the type of 'animalisation' to be deplored in the settlers by denouncing the racially prejudiced practices they brought with them from Europe and America. The 'charivari' was a tradition by which newly wed couples with a considerable age difference between bride and groom were prey to the visit of unwanted guests on the night of their wedding and were asked for drinking money in exchange for a peaceful nuptial night. If they refused to comply with the request, the guests could become rather menacing and cause damage to the newly-weds' property. In *Roughing It in the Bush*, Susanna Moodie tells of a particularly serious incident where the charivari was aimed at a mixed-race couple to, in the words of a local witness, 'punish them both for the insult they had put upon the place'; however, the disorderly crowd ended up killing the black groom.²⁵ In her poem, Atwood emphasises the contrast between civilisation and Nature by showing how the murderers 'capped their heads with feathers, masked/ their faces, [...] howled' (p. 37), in what appears to be the usurpation of an animal appearance. Moreover, it could also be argued that through their using and abusing of these animalistic features, the murderers are engaged in the process of imitating the Natives' appearance. The obvious Eurocentric bias of their action is thus underlined by the fact that they choose a 'Native look' when carrying out savage acts. Atwood concludes with the words 'Stop this. Become human' and warns that we should '[n]ever pretend this isn't/ part of the soil too' (p. 37). The poet's celebration of the natural world and of the animalistic knowledge it has to

²⁵ Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush* (originally published by Richard Bentley in London, England, 1852; the present edition is the New Canadian Library edition, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1989), p. 211.

offer is thus not to be misread as a call for prejudiced barbarism: on the contrary, she re-asserts the importance of showing a wider understanding and tolerance towards what is 'other', in terms of race, or of unknown wilderness.

Interestingly though, Atwood does not seem to draw any links with Susanna Moodie's own involvement with the Anti-Slavery Society in London in the early 1830s, before she married John Moodie and emigrated to Canada. In particular, under her maiden name 'Susanna Strickland', she became the amanuensis of Mary Prince, a former slave born in Bermuda whose autobiography *The History of Mary Prince. A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* was first published in 1831. This aspect of Moodie's writing career is useful in revealing some of the shaping and selecting process involved in her writings as a colonial subject. Gillian Whitlock points out, for example, how Susanna Strickland is not only 'the conduit through which [Mary Prince's *History*] is written down', but 'she is also in every sense Prince's foil: the white English woman who is able to embody the precepts of femininity, domestic respectability and innocent womanhood, an Englishness that casts Prince as "the other woman"'.²⁶ Whitlock adds that 'the image of each figure is secured by its reverse', following a form of 'establishment of "identities through differences" which is germane to colonialist thinking.'²⁷

This concept of securing one's identity through its reverse is however questioned by Atwood in her poems, where she emphasises how the confrontation with the 'other', in terms of alien wilderness, is able to challenge and transform the settler's sense of self. Atwood clearly makes space in her work for a process of adaptation which might not have been so visibly expressed by Susanna Moodie herself in her writings. Regarding the latter, Whitlock also underlines the 'patterns of exposure and concealment' which occur in the text, for cause that as 'a young, unmarried woman recently converted to Methodism, Strickland is an innocent scribe', while on the other hand Prince has to tell 'a story of degradation and punishment'.²⁸ According to Whitlock, the preservation of decency becomes a central issue and a central influence behind the shaping and selecting process of the 'narrator-amanuensis framework'.²⁹ The tension created by these gaps between reality and what is considered acceptable and proper is of course the driving force behind Atwood's poem cycle. In particular, Atwood sees these gaps as having been caused by Moodie's inability to voice certain aspects of her experience in Canada; those aspects Atwood focuses on in her poems as

²⁶ Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (Cassell, London, 2000), p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

she considers them to be central to the establishment of a national consciousness for Canadians. Therefore, in both instances of Moodie's work, one recognises a similar attempt at concealment caused by a lack of adequate tools with which to apprehend the reality in front of her. Once again, Moodie's set of references is deemed to be inadequate and challenged by her encounter with elements of the colonial world: Whitlock concludes that the life story recorded by Susanna Strickland Moodie 'throws the nature of femininity and its place in the colonial order of things into question and disarray, and the opposition between slave and spinster, between the colony and the metropolis [...] are undermined by what Prince has to tell'.³⁰ It could be argued that in Atwood's poem sequence, the language of the wilderness replaces the story told by the black slave, but, as the following section hopes to show, the troubling vision conjured up by both has dramatic effects on Moodie's perception of her own sense of self and of her position in the colony.

The Fragmented (Colonial) Self

The process of (unspeakable) 'animalisation' mentioned earlier through the contact with the natural world, together with the gaps and tensions which load Moodie's colonial writings, create, according to Atwood, a division and fragmentation within the settler's sense of self. Notions of the self are indeed at the centre of the poems; in particular, the idea of multiplicity, both in the sense of being several and in that of being fractured into a multiplicity, underlines Atwood's representation of Susanna Moodie. An early indication of this comes in the title of the poem cycle: the word 'journals', in the plural form, seems to illustrate the plurality of possible versions of Moodie's voice, vision and life story. Right from the beginning therefore, the poems are presented as an intimate and first-hand account of the settler's life story (as a journal, or diary, traditionally is), but also as one among many possible narratives of her life. As a result, the poems become hard to locate and occupy a strange place between reality and fiction, truth and imagination. This in turn seems to highlight the constructed aspect of any historical narrative, a concept which Atwood uses on several occasions throughout her literary career. In particular, the basic understanding that all historical accounts are subjected to the particular agendas of their authors proves especially useful in our study of the poems where two authors (Moodie and Atwood), and therefore two different sets of issues, come into play. Atwood claims indeed to be in the process of revealing the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

particular aims and concerns affecting Moodie's writings during her lifetime, aims and concerns which Atwood sees in the form of unsaid gaps. But, as has already been shown, Atwood herself also serves a particular set of purposes through her re-writing of Moodie's life.

Moreover, the multiplicity of narratives suggested by the title of the collection becomes an ambiguity of identity through the epigraph opening the poem sequence. The 'I' of the epigraph's first person speaker seems indeed to be drawing a parallel between Margaret Atwood, the actual author of the poem cycle, and Susanna Moodie, the character in whose voice she purports to speak. In a rather introspective move, the unknown speaker declares:

I take this picture of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,
every-
thing appears (p. 7)

The act of cutting out one's face, so as to use one's picture as a template within which 'every- / thing appears' is an ambiguous attempt on the part of the speaker to remove the self so that the eyes can see, to promote vision through self-effacement. Is Atwood revealing that she has to look within herself for the persona of Susanna Moodie while simultaneously detaching herself from her vision? Or is Atwood attributing to Moodie this act of semi-erasure and partial destruction, by which the eyes become the medium through which the enigmatic and fractured 'every- / thing' can be perceived? Susan Johnston observes that the epigraph provides a very explicit statement of the 'rupturing of the aesthetic paradigm', as the 'eyes' are 'trained to see in inherited modes', but 'in eluding the gaze of the human subject, the phenomenal world eludes the limits and boundaries imposed on it by the human desire to have its signification predicated on the authority of the ego.'³¹ The epigraph thus operates a crucial function and fittingly introduces a poem sequence in which the 'limits and boundaries' imposed upon the wilderness through the settlers' colonial enterprise are denounced.

However, the ambiguity of the identity of the epigraph's first person speaker is reinforced by the fact that Susanna Moodie's portrait features on the cover Atwood designed

³¹ Susan Johnston, 'Reconstructing the Wilderness: Margaret Atwood's Reading of Susanna Moodie', *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

for her collection of poems: Moodie is wearing a traditional Victorian dress and her hair is severely pulled back under a sort of stiff-laced bonnet which, together with her austere expression, adds to the solemnity of the photograph (see Figure 1). In a collage style effect, the portrait is circled by a red oval frame and placed horizontally against the drawing of a bare ground where a few blades of grass are growing. The obvious contrast between the seriousness of the photograph, its horizontal positioning and its location against a representation of the wilderness seems to be an illustration of the type of challenges Moodie's nineteenth-century European beliefs were subjected to through her experience of emigration and colonisation. In this context, the collage technique becomes particularly pertinent: the pioneer woman was literally removed from her familiar environment and superimposed upon a totally foreign and alien surrounding, the same way her picture has been cut out and pasted on a hand-drawn sketch of the wilderness. Therefore, the idea of removing one's face from one's picture both highlights the dislocation process involved in the colonial enterprise, while showing how it is necessary for allowing new visions to be had and 'every-/ thing' to appear. It is left to the reader however to decide whether the epigraph concerns solely Susanna Moodie's experience, as seen through Atwood's eyes, or whether it also reveals the poet's own vision of her creative process, as she is involved in the exploration of Moodie's life.

Moreover, the detail of the 'sewing scissors' in the epigraph, if apparently mundane, could be an indication that the speaker belongs to the domestic realm of the home, where sewing and needlework were traditional feminine activities in the nineteenth century. In this respect, it is important to point out that Susanna Moodie's writings focused essentially on the ordinary, but essential, activities involved in the process of settling and running a home in the Canadian backwoods. Her historical accounts of the period thus revolve mainly around the detailed description of day-to-day life on a bush farm, with an emphasis on the household skills a settler's wife needs to acquire for survival, such as making coffee from dandelion roots or candles from animal fat. Atwood therefore chooses to re-write a historical narrative which is essentially located in the domain of the home and based on Moodie's personal experience; her poem cycle is noticeably empty of historical references to actual events. This choice seems to be in keeping with the 'limited identities' concept of looking at history through the particularities attached to gender, social class and ethnic background. Instead of narrating history from the hegemonic point of view of politicians and heads of state, Atwood focuses on the life of a female figure who, if widely read during her lifetime, essentially confined her married life to the world of the home.

The Journals of
Susanna Moodie

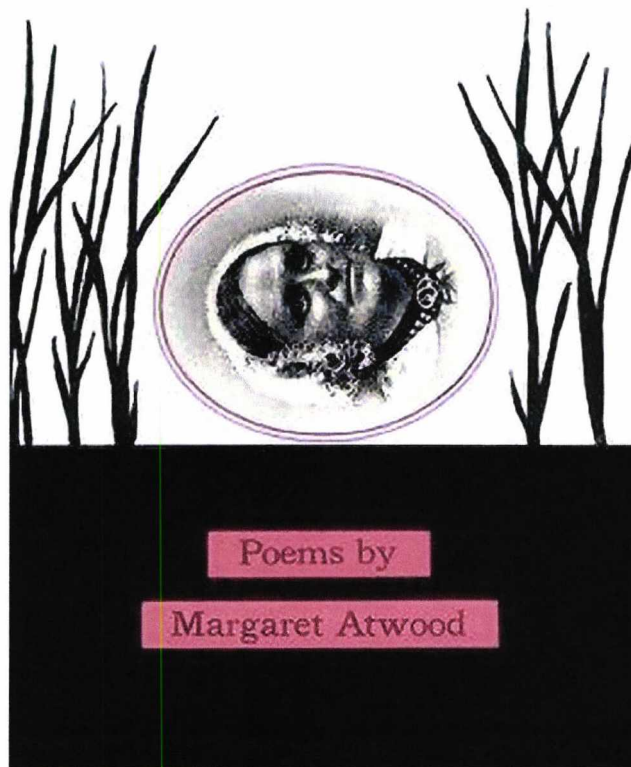


Figure 1: Cover illustration of the 1970 edition of
The Journals of Susanna Moodie

One mention is made, however, in the poem sequence of the 1837-38 Rebellions, which Moodie personally witnessed when in Canada. In the poem '1837 War in Retrospect', Atwood has Moodie comment upon the nature of history, 'that list/ of ballooning wishes, flukes,/ bent times, plunges and mistakes' (p. 35), in an effort to emphasise the way in which historical facts are perceived through their later absorption and analysis in history. The poem presents a doubly 'retrospective' perspective on the events described: Moodie is reflecting back on the 'war' which took place several years previously and which her husband helped suppress, while Atwood returns to one of the important events of nineteenth-century Canadian history and to the way in which its memory has been affected by subsequent narrations of it – one of which Atwood herself is engaged in. In Atwood's words, Moodie notices how 'this war will soon be among/ those tiny ancestral figures' (p. 35), thus showing an ability for projecting in the future which definitely belongs with Atwood's own modern vision. In particular, Moodie reveals how the event progressively becomes its own representation in the form of historical maps and narratives, how the 'tiny ancestral figures' are:

advancing through the trees
brown line green scribble

or crouching within a rough grey
crayon diagram of a fort (p. 35)

The 'crayon diagram', 'brown line' and 'green scribble' recall the way in which history is analysed and condensed, in order to be passed down to future generations. In this passage, the actual event and its later representation seem to collide into a single, temporally distorted vision. Atwood thus underlines the processes involved in history writing, both at the scale of 'large' events and at that of personal anecdotes; processes which she identifies in Moodie's writings but which are also present in Atwood's own work.

As mentioned earlier, the tensions between alienation and belonging, uncertainty and groundedness, wilderness and self, which, according to Atwood, were experienced by Moodie, are illustrated through the idea of a fragmented self and, consequently, an ambiguousness of identity. Another striking example of these various tensions comes in the form of the watercolour collage which follows the epigraph aforementioned and precedes *Journal I* (see Figure 2). It is a piece of art-work by Atwood which consists of the superposition of a female figure, arms out-stretched and wearing a black (Victorian) dress, over the picture of a dark and wild forest. The woman's position, however, as she seems to be floating



Figure 2: Illustration introducing Journal I, 1970 edition of
The Journals of Susanna Moodie

above the ground, is ambivalent and unclear: indeed, her out-stretched arms give the impression that she is either scared and fleeing the forest, or on the contrary, that she is a scary ghost-like entity haunting it. This can be seen as an interesting illustration of the settler's ambiguous contact with the unfamiliar wilderness, and of the transformations this contact brings about in her sense of self. Indeed, the latter is constantly underlined by her awareness of the way in which her presence is perceived by her alien surrounding, be it the forest, earlier settlers or new immigrants. This in turn creates a sense of division within herself, as she is aware of being both in the process of perceiving her new environment and of being perceived by it, whereby she is both the scared figure wanting to flee and, to others, the scary and unknown entity invading the forest. R.P. Bilan notices that, in the watercolour collage, the 'sharp border of light surrounding Moodie reveals the *cause* of her separation from the land', as indeed her 'initial commitment is to all those things associated with light: civilization, reason, order. Only as she comes to accept the darker side of herself, and of nature, will she be able to change and grow.'³² Finally, the ghost-like figure in this illustration seems fitting in the context of a collection of poems inspired by the life story and writings of a literary ancestress dead for almost a century at the time the poems were being written. It could be argued that Moodie is haunting and inhabiting Atwood's artistic imagination, a point which will be raised in more detail in the next section, through the study of Atwood's later re-visitations of Susanna Moodie's writings.

The contrast between perception and reality, and the way in which the wilderness challenges both, comes up time and time again in the poem cycle: in 'Further Arrivals' for instance, Moodie states that '[w]hether the wilderness is/ real or not/ depends on who lives there', with the line breaks giving an emphasis on the dilemma 'real or not' (p. 13). Atwood's Moodie develops the concept that for it to be granted reality, the wilderness needs to be witnessed and perceived, while suggesting that when it is not, it loses its groundedness and stability, and can possibly turn into 'anything'. This concept creates a fragility in Moodie's perception of, and grasp on her (alien) surroundings; but it also brings about tensions and pressures on the way she perceives her own self and sense of identity, thus raising questions as to whether she still exists when no one can see her, and if yes, under what form? This instability is clearly illustrated in 'The Wereman', where Moodie wonders 'what does [her husband] change into' when '[u]nheld by [her] sight', before turning the question to herself, noticing that '[h]e may change [her] also': 'I can't think/ what he will see/ when he opens the

³² R.P. Bilan, 'Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 2. Emphasis in the original text.

door' (p. 19). Her ominous tone, filled with frightening suggestions, conveys well the sense of dissolution of the body's boundaries hinted at earlier, while showing how the perceiving mind is responsible for the establishment, or destruction, of one's sense of self.

The imagery used by Atwood to express this draws on the traditional tropes associated with the Gothic mode, such as the shape-shifting 'wereman',³³ or the haunted and confining space, usually a castle, here the wilderness. Atwood shows how the tremendous impact the alien surrounding had on the settler's psyche is not unlike the ancestral fears and uncontrollable anxieties she sees as expressed by Gothic literature. She shows however a re-appropriation of the mode on Canadian terms, by adapting it to what she sees as the specificities of the Canadian experience. This is visible in the poem 'Dream 1: The Bush Garden', where the bush is given a hallucinatory nature, with its 'radishes thrusting down/ their fleshy snouts', its 'beets/ pulsing like slow amphibian hearts', and its 'strawberries [...] surging, huge/ and shining'. The eerie ambiance of the garden is emphasised by the fact that when Moodie 'bent/ to pick, [her] hands/ came away red and wet'; she concludes: 'I should have known/ anything planted here/ would come up blood' (p. 34). The bush garden can be seen to represent the abandoned castle of Gothic stories: it is in ruin, but yet strange things are happening and growing. Its live vegetables, with their 'pulsing hearts' and 'shining' blood do convey a Gothic atmosphere which becomes associated with the alien surrounding of the Canadian wilderness. The blood which 'comes up' from the ground both expresses the fact that the soil is alive, but also that it causes death: in a previous poem entitled 'Death of a Young Son by Drowning', Moodie describes the burial of her son in terms of 'plant[ing] him in this country/ like a flag' (p. 31). The loss of many lives inflicted by the wilderness and the process of settling it is carried through by the image of the soil absorbing the blood of the buried settlers and being strengthened and rendered more alive by it.

Besides, the 'animalisation' process as applied to the settler becoming 'animal' and part of the wilderness seems to be mirrored by a simultaneous process of the landscape turning human, as testified by its 'pulsing heart' and red blood. This theme comes up again in 'The Deaths of the Other Children', where Moodie remembers her former and now abandoned house in the bush, 'dim hollows [...] in the sandy soil', and associates it with the deaths of her 'disintegrated children' (p. 41). In a strange leap of meaning, the 'overgrowing

³³ Fiona Sparrow points out that Atwood seems to have coined the word 'wereman', with its evocation of 'something distinct from but related to a werewolf'. Fiona Sparrow, "'This Place is Some Kind of a Garden': Clearings in the Bush in the Works of Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 25, n° 1, 1990), p. 32. The change from 'wolf' to 'man'

paths' and the 'spreading briars' which tug at Moodie's skirt when she mentally returns to the ground of her former dwelling become her buried children who 'catch at [her] heels with their fingers' (p. 41). The children have become part of the landscape and keep growing into strange forms ('spreading briars'). In this poem, the Gothic atmosphere is conveyed by the fact that the wilderness seems to have absorbed Moodie's children and turned them into scary re-incarnations (they 'catch at [her] heels with their fingers'). The use of a Gothic imagery thus helps Atwood illustrate what she sees as Moodie's anxiety and fear at the effects that the wilderness has on her, while identifying those effects as being still with Canadians today. Moreover, the re-appropriation of a genre which originated in Europe in the eighteenth century and its application to the concerns of modern-day Canadians once again illustrates Atwood's attempt to re-assert the importance, and recognise the specificity, of Canada's cultural identity.

In her 1972 work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood dedicates an entire chapter to the theme of 'Nature the Monster', where she explains that 'Canadian writers as a whole do not trust Nature, they are always suspecting some dirty trick. An often-encountered sentiment is that Nature has betrayed expectation, it was supposed to be different.'³⁴ She recognises this trend in Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, where the author's 'determination to preserve her Wordsworthian faith collides with the difficulty she has in doing so when Nature fails time and time again to come through for her. The result is a markedly double-minded attitude towards Canada', an attitude which Atwood's poem cycle vividly encapsulates.³⁵ Likewise, in *The Bush Garden*, Northrop Frye's 1971 collection of reviews and essays on Canadian literature, Frye also comments on the 'tone of deep terror in regard to nature' which is often to be found in Canadian poetry, while adding that it is 'not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest.'³⁶ Incidentally, Northrop Frye borrowed from Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie* for the image suggested by the title of his work.³⁷ The idea of a 'bush garden', originally inspired from Atwood's poem of the same title, accurately

seems especially pertinent in the context of Atwood's blurring of the boundaries between the (human) body and the wilderness.

³⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51. Atwood defines as 'Wordsworthian' the particular set of early nineteenth-century aesthetic and cultural influences which pre-determined Moodie's perception of, and encounter with, the natural world in Canada.

³⁶ Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 225.

³⁷ Frye notices indeed that Atwood's poem cycle is 'unusually rich in suggestive phrases defining a Canadian sensibility'. *Ibid.*, p. x.

suggests ‘the dualities of wilderness and clearing, nature and art, chaos and order.’³⁸ It is the tension brought about by these dualities which seems to be best expressed by the use of Gothic imagery; as Northrop Frye points out, in the midst of the wilderness, ‘[t]he human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values.’³⁹ This ‘unanswerable denial’ of ‘human values’ seems to explain why Nature becomes such a scary and threatening entity for the settler.

The process of internal division and fragmentation of the self caused by the contact with the natural world and by Moodie’s inability to cope with it is nowhere better expressed than in the poem ‘The Double Voice’. Atwood’s Moodie explains that ‘[t]wo voices/ took turns using [her] eyes’ (p. 42), and proceeds to illustrate the tensions between the said and the ‘unsaid’ in her writings. She describes the ‘manners’ and ‘hushed tones’ of the voice speaking of ‘mountains or Niagara Falls,/ compos[ing] uplifting verse’; while ‘the other voice had other knowledge: that men sweat/ always and drink often,/ [...] that there is nothing to be done about mosquitoes’ (p. 42). The two voices thus represent the two sides of Moodie’s personality: her efforts to embrace and celebrate her new surroundings through writing about them (‘uplifting verse’), and her efforts at suppressing the horrible reality (‘knowledge’) she is confronted with, reality pertaining to the body (‘men sweat’) or to the wilderness (‘mosquitoes’). The poem ends with a striking contrast between the ‘rituals of seasons and rivers’, a peaceful vision of nature, and the image of ‘a dead dog/ jubilant with maggots’: this renders visible the tensions between an idealised notion of the natural world, and the crude and harsh reality Moodie had to deal with instead.

This theme is further developed in ‘Thoughts From Underground’, where Moodie is made to reflect upon her feelings for the country: ‘I said I loved it/ and my mind saw double’ (p. 54). Atwood illustrates this division by using a disjointed style, by which Moodie’s ‘paragraphs of praise’ are disrupted by her awareness of the fact that she is contrivedly making those praises. After unconvincingly stating that ‘we will all be rich and powerful’, she adds a final comment, between brackets: ‘(though it is still no place for an english gentleman)’ (p. 55). The effect is of course to undermine Moodie’s optimism and to emphasise its contrived aspect as being part of the colonial propaganda machine; but the final line of the poem, and the fact that it is inserted between brackets, accurately expresses the

³⁸ Fiona Sparrow, “‘This Place is Some Kind of a Garden’: Clearings in the Bush in the Works of Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 35.

³⁹ Northrop Frye, *Op. Cit.*, p. 225.

dilemma Moodie was faced with and the challenge to her British nineteenth-century set of values. Another possible reading could suggest that, in light of modern twentieth-century Canada, this 'place' is still not fit for 'an english gentleman', as it has become the place of Canadians: it could be argued that Atwood denounces the class and race conscious statement implicitly made by Moodie in her writings, so as to better celebrate Canadians' appropriation of the country on their own terms and their distancing from their mother country.

Atwood's Later Re-Visitings of Susanna Moodie's Writings

An important aspect of the choice to re-write the life of Susanna Moodie is the fact that she was a female writer. The trope of the female artist working within the larger framework of the (female) author's own creation will be brought to light again in the study of *Alias Grace* and in that of Anne Hébert's *Le Premier jardin*. In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* however, the situation is made more complex by the fact that the central female figure whose life is being re-written is a published author whose work has been read and introduced by the female writer writing about her (Margaret Atwood).⁴⁰ Linda Hutcheon's notion of the 'parodic gap' becomes useful here: Hutcheon explains indeed that parody is 'a popular form for women novelists', as 'its ironic double-voicing allows a writer to speak *to* her culture, from *within* that culture, but without being totally recuperated by it.'⁴¹ She adds that parody 'is a weapon against marginalization: it literally works to incorporate that upon which it ironically comments. It can be both inside and outside the dominant discourses whose critique it embodies.'⁴² Atwood's poem cycle seems to fit this description, as its attempt at re-discovering the pioneering experience of a nineteenth-century author who achieved little literary recognition at the time does work against marginalisation. Moreover, in using Susanna Moodie's writings and re-adapting them to the concerns of modern-day Canada, Atwood is both writing from inside and outside the dominant discourses which she sees as having shaped the Canadian consciousness from as early as the nineteenth century and up until the 1970s.

Her project also fits into the context of the national and cultural revolution which Canada underwent during the 1960s and 70s; the aim of this revolution was to define Canada's national consciousness, as well as its literary canon. The need to find and establish

⁴⁰ Margaret Atwood wrote the introduction to the 1986 Virago edition of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*.

⁴¹ Linda Hutcheon, "'Shape Shifters': Canadian Women Novelists and the Challenge to Tradition", *Op. Cit.*, p. 226. Emphasis in the original text.

literary ancestors also became crucial, as is illustrated by Atwood's re-discovery of Susanna Moodie in her poem cycle. The relationship to such literary ancestors raises issues, however, as to the difficulty for the younger poet to assert herself in relation to the body of work written before her. With reference to Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, critic Faye Hammill shows how Atwood can be said to 'misread', or 'read against' Moodie's writings so as to, in Bloom's words, 'clear imaginative space for [herself]'.⁴³ In the context of female authorship and postcolonial writing, it seems Bloom's work takes on a new relevance: Atwood faces indeed the double challenge of defining her place in relation to previous female writers, and of finding her voice in relation to the hegemony of the European canon. It thus could be argued that her project of 'mis-writing' or 'writing against' Susanna Moodie has the difficult dual purpose of defining a national consciousness for Canada, while also addressing the double influence of her literary ancestresses and of Europe's hegemonic cultural centre.

Following on Atwood's lead, a number of Anglo-Canadian novelists, poets and playwrights have returned to the work of Susanna Moodie and 'offered a series of creative projections of her character.'⁴⁴ Some have even featured Atwood's *Journals* in their work, thus exemplifying the impact which the latter has had on later creative readings of Moodie's writings.⁴⁵ However, as Canada's culture and literature progressively acquired international recognition, and as Atwood herself gained a canonical status, we notice a change over the years in her authorial intentions behind her re-writing of Moodie's work. Atwood went back to Moodie's writings several times subsequently in her career, and this section will strive to trace the ways in which her aims for doing so have evolved from the writing of the *Journals* in 1970, to her unpublished play *Grace* in 1979, and through to her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*.

Atwood's later re-visitations of Moodie's work focused solely on a particular episode of *Life in the Clearings*, where Moodie narrates her visits to the Kingston Provincial Penitentiary, in 1849, and to the Toronto Lunatic Asylum, in 1852, and where on both occasions she asked to see the 'celebrated murderess, Grace Marks'.⁴⁶ This anecdote of the story of Grace Marks would inspire Atwood on several occasions: in 1974, when asked by

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴³ Faye Hammill, 'Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and "That Moodie Bitch"', *The American Review of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 29, n° 1, 1999), p. 69, quoting from Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Faye Hammill notices indeed that Robertson Davies, Beth Hopkins, Carol Shields, Donna Smyth, Timothy Findley, Anne Joyce and Thomas King 'have all incorporated a "Susanna Moodie" figure into their work.' Faye Hammill, *Op. Cit.*, p. 67.

⁴⁵ Faye Hammill mentions Donna Smyth's play *Susanna Moodie* (1976), which is interspersed with recitations of poems from Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁶ Susanna Moodie, *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 195.

CBC producer George Jonas to write a script for television, she wrote about Grace Marks, basing her script on 'Moodie's version, which was already highly dramatic in form. In it, Grace is brooding and obsessive, and James McDermott is putty in her hands'.⁴⁷ She originally entitled the script 'Grace Marks', but it was later produced as *The Servant Girl*. In 1979, Atwood was invited to turn her television script into a theatre piece: she 'did give this a try',⁴⁸ and composed *Grace*, a theatre play in two acts.⁴⁹ However the play was never published nor performed, as Atwood explained: 'it was all too much for me, and I gave it up'.⁵⁰ Interestingly, the play was at the stage of a final draft when Atwood decided to dismiss it: not only had it been completed, proofread and edited, but Atwood had also clearly devised how the stage should be arranged:

I hoped to use a multi-level stage, so the main floor, the upstairs, and the cellar could all be seen at once. I wanted to open the play in the penitentiary and close it in the lunatic asylum, and I had some idea of having the spirit of Susanna Moodie flown in on wires, in a black silk dress, like a cross between Peter Pan and a bat⁵¹

The script shows however that Moodie is more than just a spirit 'flying in': she is a fully fleshed character whose role is crucial as she frames the action by opening the performance, closing it and also appearing half-way through it.⁵² The play's heavy reliance on Moodie's version of the facts is also illustrated by its opening on Moodie's first encounter with Grace Marks: this seems to highlight the fact that the plot will be closely following the story inspired from that first meeting, but, as Faye Hammill has pointed out, the action is also framed by the visits of a time-travelling 'Mrs. Moodie' character.⁵³

Both *Grace* and *Alias Grace* will be looked at in more depth in Chapter Three, so as to highlight the ways in which the original narrative evolved drastically to become the later novel. Suffice to say, however, that, surprisingly, Atwood's earlier attempt at telling Grace's story seems to be inhabited and almost haunted by the voice and figure of Susanna Moodie.

⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1513.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1513.

⁴⁹ Surprisingly, it seems Atwood does not always 'remember' having written this play. For instance, during the series of interviews with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu in Toronto in March 1995, she declared having remained 'open to all the forms [of literary expression]. Except theatre. I've never written a play.' From Margaret Atwood and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, *Two Solicitudes: Conversations*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 67.

⁵⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1513.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1513.

⁵² The final draft of the play is filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers held by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, at the University of Toronto. This being an unpublished manuscript, only indirect references will be possible.

⁵³ Faye Hammill, 'Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and "That Moodie Bitch"', *Op. Cit.*, p. 72.

Faye Hammill shows how the play not only replicates the factual inaccuracies of Susanna Moodie's account, as with the names of the main protagonists, but also reproduces some of her interpretative biases, in particular regarding Grace's culpability in the murders.⁵⁴ Hammill adds, however, that although Atwood fails to question the accuracy of Moodie's account, she does not resort to a simple recasting of the narrative into a dramatic form. Hammill emphasizes how *Grace* shows the way its story is filtered through Moodie's experience and perceptual biases, and that the repeated intrusions of the Moodie figure, with her authoritative statements about criminals, mental patients, and pioneers, underline her interpreting presence.⁵⁵ This seems to illustrate another instance of the 'parodic gap' mentioned earlier: Atwood uses Moodie's story so as to better reveal the ways in which the nineteenth-century author's (prejudiced) opinions influence and shape her text.

This is also visible in the play through the surprising appearance Moodie makes halfway through the action, as the first murder victim, the housekeeper, is about to be hit on the head with an axe by the farmhand. The stage directions specify that Susanna Moodie is a twentieth-century visitor to some establishment-like Pioneer Village, that she is carrying a clipboard and accompanied by a guide,⁵⁶ while the action in the house is momentarily interrupted, with Grace and the other characters acting as wax models.⁵⁷ Interestingly, it is also said that Moodie's accent is now 'Canadian' and that there are faint noises of cars on a nearby freeway in the background, which leave the audience in no doubt as to the time period this scene is set in. Moreover, the establishment which she and the guide are visiting is in fact the farmhouse where the murders took place, and for the sake of that scene it becomes the replica (that it actually is) of a nineteenth-century house.

Susanna Moodie thus features very much as a twentieth-century version of herself in this scene: not unlike her chronicles and anecdotes about nineteenth-century life in the colony, the private tour she is being given could very well be the topic of her next article, as suggested by the journalistic detail of the 'clipboard'. She and the guide comment on the type of furniture people would have had in 'those days' and on typical nineteenth-century household customs, such as the use of 'iron stoves'. Moodie notices how things were so much more

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

⁵⁶ It seems the establishment in question is Black Creek Pioneer Village, a 'restored nineteenth-century rural Victorian community located in northwest Toronto. The village re-creates the past with over thirty-five carefully restored 1860s shops and homes, [and] interpreters in period dress who help guide you through Canadian history.' Information found on the website of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, at <http://www.trca.on.ca> (September 6th 2002). Interestingly, Atwood cites Black Creek Pioneer Village in the Acknowledgements to *Alias Grace*, her 1996 novel.

⁵⁷ Faye Hammill, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

relaxed and peaceful then, thinking of the simple domestic duties women had to perform, and of the satisfaction of a home well provided for. However, she also shows an awareness of twentieth-century ideologies as she adds that she had better not write this, as 'Women's Lib would probably have [her] head'. Then, ironically, the play goes back to its main action with the farmhand hitting the housekeeper on the head with an axe: so much for the peaceful way of life women allegedly had in those days, away from the stress of leading a successful professional career and family life. So much also for the supposed 'liberation' which claims to have given women more freedom, but paradoxically not that of wanting a traditional lifestyle. Through the use of irony and the juxtaposition of various scenes set in various time periods, but yet somehow connected through the character of Susanna Moodie, Atwood seems to express her sharp criticism of the restrictive roles imposed upon women, some of these stemming from the feminist movement itself, as was illustrated earlier.

It is also important to note that this gender issue, as related to the character of Susanna Moodie, is addressed here for the first time, but is never really raised in the *Journals*. Atwood admitted indeed that Moodie was a creature of her own society, and that she would have disapproved of many feminist principles, an observation which is certainly true of the Moodie which features in her poem sequence.⁵⁸ However, the association of the (un-)tamed wilderness to the female body, and the exploration of the feminine psyche in the context of a figurative 'wild zone', are recurrent tropes in feminist critical theory. Sue Spaul mentions Shirley and Edwin Ardener's concept of the 'wild', as defining those elements of female experience which fall outside of the dominant structure, and their linked notion of the 'wild zone' of women's culture, while Elaine Showalter argues that the 'wild zone' represents the true arena for the examination of women's difference.⁵⁹ Moreover, Gillian Whitlock points out that the 'fragmentation of self, the tensions of language produced by the failure of expectations before the intractability of the present, the estrangement and self-consciousness of gender, class and place, the disappearance of absolute frames of reference, which were the legacy of emigration for Moodie were, for very different reasons, preoccupations of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s.'⁶⁰ I would like to argue, however, that these were not the preoccupations of Atwood in her *Journals*, but became a concern for the author later

⁵⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'Susanna Moodie', draft version of the Introduction to Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (Virago Press, London, 1986), filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers held by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, at the University of Toronto.

⁵⁹ Sue Spaul, 'Gynocriticism', *Feminist Readings/ Feminists Reading*, edited by Sara Mills and Lynne Pearce (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1989), pp. 93-94, quoting from Edwin Ardener, 'Belief and the Problem of Women', *Perceiving Women*, edited by Shirley Ardener (Malaby Press, London, 1975), and from Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 8, n° 2, 1981).

on, as is illustrated in her 1972 novel *Surfacing*, in which a troubled female figure on a trip into the Canadian wilderness finds a sense of self and identity.⁶¹ Moreover, Atwood will use her historical re-writing process to powerfully denounce women's victimisation in the poems 'Marrying the Hangman' and 'Half-Hanged Mary', which will be examined in the next section of this chapter, as well as in her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*.

In *Grace*, the author seems to collapse all temporal boundaries by featuring the contemporary version of a woman who spent most of her life precisely commenting and writing on life in the nineteenth century. Moodie is looking back at what would have been a contemporary setting for her, and, ironically, shows nostalgia for a way of life she notoriously disliked, as her bleak and discouraging accounts of life as a nineteenth-century settler in Canada testify. Simultaneously, however, Moodie also becomes a replica for Atwood herself, the real twentieth-century writer who researches into the past in order to find material for *her* literary work. A sort of cycle is thus set in place here, with Atwood reaching out to Moodie and almost becoming one with her through the story of yet another nineteenth-century woman, Grace Marks.⁶² Moreover, the image of Moodie as a twentieth-century presence in the Canadian landscape reminds one of her appearance in modern-day Toronto in 'A Bus Along St Clair: December', the last poem of the *Journals*. It seems that on both occasions Moodie returns from the past to haunt the present, probably as a way to illustrate the cultural influence which Atwood sees her still exerting over contemporary Canada. The irony of Atwood's 'parodic gap' thus powerfully denounces the set of nineteenth-century (biased) values which dictated Moodie's vision at the time, and which have affected Canada's imaginative vision subsequently.

In 1996, Atwood went back to the same episode of Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* which she had used for *Grace*, in order to re-write it for her novel *Alias Grace*.⁶³ Her use of the original anecdote drastically changed and seems to testify to the changed status of Canada's culture and literature at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, the need to define a national consciousness and literary canon was not as pressing anymore, as both were better

⁶⁰ Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 72.

⁶¹ In this respect, one notices striking continuities between Atwood's poem cycle and her novel *Surfacing*, in particular regarding the tension between alienation and integration in the wilderness, but also regarding the 'hauntings' of the dead child, which are reminiscent of Moodie's own lost children in the poem sequence, and of the ways in which they come back and 'haunt' her.

⁶² Atwood confessed that she saw Moodie as her 'youthful Ms. Hyde', while she was the 'Miss Jekyll through which she manifested herself – made of my anti-matter, a negative to my positive, or vice versa.' Margaret Atwood, 'Writing *Susanna*', from www.owtoad.com (March 21st 2003).

⁶³ It will be observed that in this instance, Atwood is not only engaged in the process of re-writing Moodie's work, but also in that of re-writing her own, in what comes to be seen as a double and simultaneous attempt at re-interpreting the past.

established by then, thanks in part to Atwood herself. It seems that in view of the international recognition the author had achieved, the assertion of a literary ancestress was less necessary, and that she could therefore start questioning the veracity of some of Moodie's anecdotes. This is visible in the way in which Moodie features in *Alias Grace*: she is mentioned briefly only on a couple of occasions, where she and her writings are described in depreciative terms. Hammill notices indeed that the novel 'repeatedly questions the authority of Susanna Moodie's account' of the murder case, by including 'quotations from the most dubious parts of Moodie's text'.⁶⁴ As a consequence, Moodie 'assumes a new and diminished function in *Alias Grace*', and she 'loses a great deal of her mythic allure'.⁶⁵

It is also important to point out that in her 1970 poem cycle, Atwood does not wish to produce a detailed portrait of nineteenth-century Canada; in *Alias Grace*, however, her aims have shifted and she gives a very thorough account of life in nineteenth-century Ontario for an immigrant working-class maid, as will be seen in Chapter Three. Moreover, Susanna Moodie was not an oppressed female figure, but belonged to the white British middle-class and was educated, as well as published, during her lifetime. It is therefore understood that she was able to make her views heard, and that her status was visibly different from that of Grace Marks, or from that of the other female characters whose lives Atwood chose to re-write, and who are mentioned in the next section. The specific aspect of Moodie's historical presence which Atwood addresses in her poem cycle thus seems to be the way in which her writings were fraught with European hegemonic distortion, and the ambivalence and division which the latter brought about. In this context, and as said before, Atwood is trying to give voice to Moodie's unsaid vision, the one which is crucial in allowing later generations of Canadians to define their place within the imagined narrative of their nation. Moreover, it will also be shown how, for very different reasons, Grace Marks too leaves gaps in her narrative, and to what degree the unsaid elements of her account provide the driving tension behind her story.

⁶⁴ Faye Hammill, 'Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and "That Moodie Bitch"', *Op. Cit.*, p. 74.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Re-Writing the Lives of Other Historical Female Figures

Two other poems and a short story by Margaret Atwood also revolve around actual historical events involving a central female character whose life story is being re-written and re-interpreted from a modern perspective. In the collection *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), we find the prose poem 'Marrying the Hangman', which is followed by a short note where Atwood explains that in 'eighteenth-century Québec the only way for someone under sentence of death to escape hanging was, for a man, to become a hangman, or, for a woman, to marry one. Françoise Laurent, sentenced to hang for stealing, persuaded Jean Corolère, in the next cell, to apply for the vacant post of executioner, and also to marry her.'⁶⁶ The poem thus uses the figure of the female convict, which will come up again in *Alias Grace*, and shows in what ways the female body and its attributes are criminalized, or considered 'guilty'. This is visible in the poem through the fact that the female prisoner is sentenced to death for stealing clothes from her employer, as '[s]he wished to make herself more beautiful' (p. 209). Moreover, when in prison, she uses her voice 'like a hand, her voice reaches through the wall, stroking and touching' (p. 209), so as to seduce her fellow inmate and be set free. This, however, raises the suspicion of the community:

Everyone said he was a fool.
Everyone said she was a clever woman.
They used the word *ensnare*. (p. 211)

The use of italics and the line breaks in this passage are very evocative of the disapproval surrounding the female protagonist's actions, which are seen here as manipulative, and almost dangerous, with the suggestion of falling into a trap ('ensnare'). The poem thus shows how women's bodies are associated with the notion of ill doing, and the role they play in the victimisation of women. However, through the figure of the female temptress, Atwood gives an empowering vision of women's predicament: the prisoner's body, the suggested reason for her imprisonment, becomes the tool through which she achieves freedom. The poem clearly suggests that the female convict had recourse to seduction in order to fulfil her aim: 'there is no hangman, first she must create him, she must persuade this man [...]. She must transform his hands so they will be willing to twist the rope around throats' (p. 209). The poem thus develops the trope of female 'bad' behaviour, a theme recurrent in Atwood's work and developed more fully in *Alias Grace*, while addressing both the unjust victimisation of

⁶⁶ Margaret Atwood, 'Marrying the Hangman', *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (Virago Press, London, 1998), p. 211. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

women, and the empowering effect of the representation of a negative female archetype, such as a female convict, or a witch, as will be seen in the poem 'Half-Hanged Mary'.

'Marrying the Hangman' also raises questions as to the nature of history writing: the poem's narrator notices indeed that '[h]istory cannot be erased, although we can soothe ourselves by speculating about it' (p. 211). The poem's central (historical) story, involving a female prisoner whose seductive features are also expressed through her story-telling skills, thus seems to highlight the fact that there are several possible versions of every history, and that the latter is nothing more than a constructed narrative.⁶⁷ The narrator's repeated claims that the poem's story 'is not fantasy, it is history' testify to an attempt at veracity and authenticity; but this is undermined by the fact that several types of historical narratives are present in the poem: the anecdote of the female prisoner in eighteenth-century Quebec is contrasted to the stories of the narrator's friends, stories 'which cannot be believed and which are true. They are horror stories', set in contemporary Canada (p. 210). The poem thus re-imagines and re-writes the female convict's eighteenth-century story against the backdrop of modern-day 'horror stories' of physical abuse, and possibly rape, where the female body, once again, occupies centre stage. Interestingly, the 'hangman' becomes a haunting figure in these women's narratives: as the person officially appointed to carry out death sentences, he is the symbol of a (judicial) system which condones women's victimisation, as seen through the example of the female convict being sentenced to death for petty theft while the male prisoner, guilty of duelling, is only sentenced to imprisonment. The 'hangman' thus becomes the object of women's persecution, past and present, as illustrated through the suggestion of a sexual attack involving strangulation: 'there is more than one hangman' (p. 210).

The contrast between past and modern perspectives on the events of the story is also counterbalanced by a man/woman divide in terms of (historical) discourses. This particular divide is visible through the use of what Atwood called 'catalogs', by which the poem is intersected by enumerations of words which are attributed, respectively, to the male convict and to the female prisoner. The function of these catalogs is to provide a clear contrast between male and female voices and preoccupations: in the woman's enumeration we notice many words emphasising the sensuality of the (female) body and its fecundity, as well as words relating to the domestic world: 'nipple, arms, lips, wine, belly, hair, bread, thighs, eyes, eyes' (p. 210). The male convict's enumeration, on the other hand, is consumed by visions of the outside world, and by visions of taking possession of the latter: 'the end of walls, the end

⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that in this context, the female convict becomes a sort of Scheherazade figure, a trope which will also be present in *Alias Grace*.

of ropes, the opening of doors, a field, the wind, a house, the sun' (p. 210). These enumerations emphasise the differences in types of language and visions used by men and women on each side of the gender divide; as a result, the disjointed and contradictory nature of these catalogs creates a sense of incoherence and division between the two characters. This also illustrates the power relation between both, which is visible, too, through their obvious differences of legal status.⁶⁸

This leads us on to another important theme of the poem: the (dubious) motives behind the male convict's actions, namely, accepting to become a hangman and to marry a female convict, when it is revealed that '[h]e was not condemned to death, freedom awaited him' (p. 210). The narrator wonders what 'was the temptation, the one that worked?', and suggests that the male prisoner perhaps wanted:

someone to watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men (pp. 210-11)

This highlights the control-obsessed and almost perverted nature of the prisoner's choice to marry the female convict, as well as his need for domination through gratitude. Marriage in the poem becomes associated with a prison, a theme which will be examined in more depth in Anne Hébert's play *La Cage*, but also in her novel *Kamouraska*. In both works, as in the poem, matrimony is seen as the locus of women's victimisation and imprisonment: '[w]hat did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another?' (p. 211). In this context, the poem's repeated claims that '[t]hey both kept their promises' raise doubts and worries as to the nature of these promises: indeed, what did the female convict have to promise? What will be the price of her liberty?

This negative and ominous vision of marriage is reinforced by the enumerative catalogs which end the poem: while the male convict, now freed, speaks of 'foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife', his bride says 'water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood' (p. 211). The power-driven and potentially threatening aspect of the hangman's vision is illustrated by terms such as 'fist', 'knife', 'order', 'foot' and 'boot', while 'roads', 'city' and 'time' suggest man's occupation and possession of the land and of its

⁶⁸ In an interview, Atwood explained that one could not 'become the hangman if [one was] a woman', thus illustrating the gender imbalance of power which predicates that only marriage can save women from death and prison, but refuses to entrust them with the official position of executioner. Interview with Karla Hammond, 'Defying Distinctions', *Op. Cit.*, p. 103.

history ('time'). The woman, on the other hand, produces a vision which harmoniously associates the (female) body with the natural world, but which also evokes death: 'willow' and 'rope hair', for instance, conjure up the image of the woman as tree, as well as that of the woman hanging ('rope'), while 'earth belly' and 'cave' convey the idea of the womb as (fertile) earth, but also that of the woman being buried underground ('cave'). Moreover, death and its physicality are clearly suggested through words such as 'blood', 'open', 'shroud', and even 'meat'. The poem thus vividly depicts how (the victimisation of) the female body can be seen to represent and to have been the cause of gender inequality throughout history, while the nature of history is questioned through the association of a multiplicity of historical perspectives to a multiplicity of narratives.

The next poem under study is 'Half-Hanged Mary' from *Morning in the Burned House* (1995); it is based on the life story of Mary Webster who 'was accused of witchcraft in the 1680s in a Puritan town in Massachusetts and hanged from a tree – where, according to one of the several surviving accounts, she was left all night. It is known that when she was cut down she was still alive, since she lived for another fourteen years.'⁶⁹ The poem explores women's persecution through the accusation of witchcraft, a theme which will also be examined in Anne Hébert's play *La Cage*.⁷⁰ This persecution is expressed, once again, in terms of the female body, and of the latter's association with Nature. The poem's central female figure and narrator declares indeed:

I was hanged for living alone,
for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,
tattered skirts, few buttons,
a weedy farm in my own name,
and a surefire cure for warts;

Oh yes, and breasts,
and a sweet pear hidden in my body.
Whenever there's talk of demons
these come in handy. (pp. 58-59)

The passage highlights the arbitrary nature of the reasons behind the protagonist's death sentence: her (attractive) physical features, and especially the physical signs of her gender, namely, her 'breasts' and 'sweet pear hidden in [her] body', which are emphasised by the

⁶⁹ Margaret Atwood, 'Half-Hanged Mary', Introductory Note, *Morning in the Burned House* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1995), p. 58. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

breaks in line and stanza. Moreover, owning property for a woman on her own seems to have also triggered suspicion, while the protagonist's 'cure for warts' suggests a knowledge of the natural world used for medical remedies, which could have also been found subversive by the authorities. This is confirmed by the mention that the protagonist 'cured your baby, Mrs.,/ and flushed yours out of you,/ Non-wife, to save your life' (p. 60). The life- and death-giving properties of the protagonist's actions could possibly have caused her condemnation by the (male) community: we see here evoked midwifery skills in the caring and healing of newborn babies, but also in the carrying out of abortion for unmarried pregnant women, in order to prevent their social exclusion in the context of the austere Puritanism of late seventeenth-century New England.

The poem is underlined by an imagery of the natural world used to evoke the female body ('sweet pear'), while the persecution and attempted killing of that body is expressed in terms of going against Nature: the protagonist's hanging is described with the image of the 'blackened apple stuck back onto the tree', while she exclaims '[u]p I go like a windfall in reverse' (p. 59).⁷¹ The emphasis is thus on a reversal of Nature's rhythms and cycles. This is confirmed by the metaphor used by the female protagonist, as she is hanging from the tree: she compares her body to 'a flag raised to salute the moon' (p. 59). In the traditional understanding of such symbols, the moon is said to rule over women's bodies and their cycles, and by extension to represent the (hidden) realm of women's existence, the same way the sun governs over men's world of action. The central protagonist's persecution is thus read in light of the ancestral and biased perception of men and women's difference, a difference which she locates primarily at the level of the body.

It is interesting to note that in her re-writing of this actual historical event, Atwood omits to mention any official names, dates or places, but divides her poem into ten sections which are headed '7 p.m.', '9 p.m.', '12 midnight', '6 a.m.' and end with 'Later'. These time punctuations, while bringing a sense of the progression of the heroine's ordeal, also give a sharp modern contrast to the past anecdote: the use of 'a.m.' and 'p.m.' indicates a contemporary division of time, and gives the impression that one is reading the official report of the events of Mary Webster's hanging. This seems to suggest that the poet wishes to have the story read against a modern background, so as to emphasise its relevance to contemporary

⁷⁰ The motif of a victimised female figure accused of witchcraft in Puritan New England also suggests interesting continuities with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*; both works will be mentioned in the discussion on Anne Hébert's *La Cage*.

times, and, once again, use the past to say something about the present. Atwood first mentioned the story of Mary Webster in a 1980 journal article where she used the anecdote as an illustration for the current ‘worldwide epidemic’ of ‘political witch-hunting’.⁷² She explained that ‘[w]itches were consulted in private, but their only public role was to be persecuted’, while adding that ‘[w]itch-hunting was probably always political in nature, an attempt by the powerful to control the potentially subversive’.⁷³ This seems to fit in with the reference to the heroine’s (controversial) midwifery skills, and with the fact that her former patients ignore her pleas for help when she is hanging from the tree: ‘[y]ou were my friend, you too./ [...] Help me down? You don’t dare./ I might rub off on you’ (p. 60).

In her article, Atwood linked witch-hunting to ‘the current wave of book banning taking place in Canada’, and to the fact that ‘all the most prominently publicized banned writers have been women’.⁷⁴ Atwood thus uses the figure of the witch to denounce the fact that ‘when a woman [writer] is attacked in print, it’s often for being who she is’, namely a woman, rather than for writing what she writes.⁷⁵ This, in Atwood’s opinion, is reminiscent of witch-hunting, which, to the difference of ‘more conventional forms of justice and punishment’, punishes people for who they are, rather than for what they have done.⁷⁶ She adds that, in spite of the advent of the Women’s Movement, old stereotypes regarding women’s place in society are still in place, and women writers are particularly subject to such gender bias, ‘for writing itself is uncanny: it uses words for evocation rather than for denotation; it is spell-making.’⁷⁷

In her 1995 re-writing of Mary Webster’s story however, Atwood does not choose to represent her in terms of the persecuted female artist; the protagonist’s main distinguishing feature seems to be her female body, thus emphasising the fact that, ultimately, she is victimised for being who she is, rather than for what she does. Interestingly, Atwood also confessed in her 1980 article that Mary Webster was ‘one of [her] ancestors’, adding: ‘[s]he is my favorite ancestor, [...] and if there’s one thing I hope I’ve inherited from her, it’s her neck’, for ‘[o]ne needs a neck like that if one is determined to be a writer, especially a woman

⁷¹ The reference to the ‘blackened apple’ also evokes the fruit of knowledge, sinful temptation and the fall of mankind, caused (allegedly) by the intervention of a woman. These images seem very fitting in the context of a poem denouncing the unfair (religion-led) victimisation of women in the past.

⁷² Margaret Atwood, ‘Witches: the Strong Neck of a Favorite Ancestor’, *Radcliffe Quarterly* (Vol. 66, n° 3, 1980), p. 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

writer'.⁷⁸ The fact that Mary Webster is the poet's ancestress, and that her plight evokes for Atwood that of women authors, seem to draw a link with Atwood's re-writing of Susanna Moodie's life, her other (literary) ancestress. A recurring pattern appears to be emerging, by which the fascination with the lives of dead female ancestors prompts the poet to re-interpret the latter from a modern perspective, so as to carry a relevance for women's situation in the present. This pattern is confirmed in the short story which will be examined next and which revolves around the life of Marie Payzant, a story which 'came to [Atwood] first through a family connection'.⁷⁹

We will also notice a similar pattern in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*, where the novelist focuses on the life story of one of her nineteenth-century ancestresses, as well as in *Le Premier jardin*, through the brief mention of Marie Rollet, another of Hébert's fore-mothers. The need to return to the past in order to re-interpret the life stories of some of its female figures thus seems to be accompanied by the authors' tentative search for their own private past and origins, a theme in keeping with postcolonial writing's attempt to address issues of displacement, alienation and self-assertion. In this context, history becomes the tool through which these writers are able to address these issues: they denounce past persecution, offer an empowered vision of the present, and gain a renewed sense of self and belonging.

The poem also raises the question of God's role in the persecution of the female protagonist, a theme particularly fitting in the context of a poem set in 1680s Puritan New England. The protagonist asks:

Well God, now that I'm up here [...]
we can continue our quarrel,
the one about free will.

Is it my choice that I'm dangling
like a turkey's wattles from this
more than indifferent tree?
If Nature is Your alphabet,
what letter is this rope? (p. 61)

The idea of women's bodies belonging to the realm of the natural world (here again with the image of the 'turkey's wattles'), and that of God as the creator of Nature ('Your alphabet'), collide in this passage through the accusative final line which highlights the role that religion

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Margaret Atwood, 'The Bombardment Continues', Introductory Note, *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in our History* (Doubleday, Toronto, 2001), p. 11.

plays in women's victimisation, and by extension, in the victimisation of Nature. The rope, and the killing it stands for, is against Nature, like the Puritan-led religious accusations of witchcraft and devil worshipping. Through the discussion of Anne Hébert's play *La Cage*, we will evoke some of the critical debate surrounding the figure of the witch in Quebecois literature, but suffice to mention Mary Jean Green's observation that 'witchcraft is the ultimate crime with which women have traditionally been charged'.⁸⁰ Green notices that in recent years, feminists have done a good deal to rehabilitate the image of the witch, both by 'exposing its function as a tool of social repression', but also by 'recasting witchcraft as an expression of female power'.⁸¹ This remark, which Green made in relation to Quebecois women writers, is particularly true of Atwood in this poem. The final image of the female protagonist is one of empowerment, as she declares: '[b]efore, I was not a witch./ But now I am one' (p. 67). She thus chooses to embrace and celebrate her marginal status, which she experiences as a form of epiphany: '[m]y body of skin waxes and wanes/ around my true body,/ [...] Having been hanged for something/ I never said,/ I can now say anything I can say' (pp. 67-68). The experience has been a liberating one for the heroine, and she describes her ostracism from the community in terms of a rapprochement with the natural world:

Holiness gleams on my dirty fingers,
I eat flowers and dung, [...]
and give thanks, blasphemies [...]
The cosmos unravels from my mouth,
all fullness, all vacancy. (pp. 68-69)

This final image gathers all the binary opposites of the poem and combines them into the central female character: she has become Nature, God, the Devil, the cosmos and nothingness; she is the ultimate symbol of power, the one transcending all man-made divisions into an all-encompassing and chaotic vision. She is also the image of female 'bad' behaviour mentioned earlier: the female victim, wrongly accused, has turned into a threatening and powerful figure, transforming women's victimisation into a source of empowerment.

The next piece of work under study is a short story Atwood has recently contributed to *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in our History* (2001), a collection of short stories by well-known Canadian authors who were asked to write what, for them, defined the Canadian nation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Atwood's story 'The Bombardment

⁸⁰ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2001), p. 101.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Continues' is set in 1759 Quebec on the eve of the English victory over *Nouvelle France*. It is written in the traditional eighteenth-century epistolary form and centres around Marie Payzant, a Huguenot French woman, who narrates the events of the Conquest through letters she is writing to her children, so that 'should [she] die in the conflict and should [they] be spared, [she] should wish [them] to know a little of [their] dear Father, so ruthlessly murdered.'⁸² The historical events mentioned are therefore perceived from the central protagonist's personal and very particular perspective, a trope also used in *Alias Grace*. We learn that Marie Payzant and her family were forced to flee France because of the religious and political persecution they suffered there as Protestants, and that they sought and found asylum in England, where they were free to practice their faith. She and her husband then chose to go settle in the British colony of Nova Scotia, in Canada, where Protestants were given free land by the English, regardless of their language or nationality, as a way to counterbalance the French catholic presence on the new continent. However, shortly after setting up in Nova Scotia, the Payzants found themselves under attack by Native tribes allied with the French in the Franco-British war over territory occupation. Louis Payzant was murdered, their children were taken by the Natives, and the family lost all their property. Marie Payzant was then made prisoner and brought to the city of Quebec in *Nouvelle France*, where she had to abjure her faith in order to obtain the return of her children.

It is important to note that this harrowing account of political and religious persecution highlights the ways in which religion, language, nationality and race intersected, and, at times, collided, in mid-eighteenth century Canada. Marie Payzant's particular situation allows the reader to understand some of the social and political divisions which were present at the beginning of the colony. Indeed, although Marie is of French descent and speaks French, she is a captive in *Nouvelle France*, and she is distrusted by her fellow compatriots: 'I am virtually a prisoner here, [...] they keep a sharp eye on me. They are not my friends at heart' (p. 14). Yet, she does not feel any allegiance to the protestant English who are about to take over the colony, as although this will give her religious freedom, she realises that she 'will be among foreigners' and faces 'an inevitable and melancholy reality – that you, my own children, will grow up speaking nothing but English' (p. 22). The story also illustrates the intersections between race relations and political allegiances: Marie Payzant notices that the Malecite tribe who killed her husband are allied with the French, against the English, 'in pursuit of a war not their own' (p. 13). The reason for such an alliance is the French offer to

⁸² Margaret Atwood, 'The Bombardment Continues', *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in our History* (Doubleday, Toronto, 2001), p. 13. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

the Natives to keep the children of their victims: this was a way for them to replenish their population which had been deeply affected by epidemics and warfare, both consequences of European colonisation.

Therefore, the divide in terms of racial, national, religious and linguistic criteria is shown to have been totally different in the early days of the colony. This in turn carries some relevance to the situation of contemporary Canada, and allows the alleged national ‘fragmentation’ and ‘constitutional crisis’ to be perceived in a very different way. The Quebecois claims to sovereignty in particular, are given a different dimension, in so far as the story shows how, in the era of *Nouvelle France*, religious unity had predominance over language and nationality, while in contemporary Quebec, language, and to a certain degree, national origins, have become the defining factors of the nation. It thus could be argued that such factors, which hold a major importance today, might in time be replaced by other criteria, therefore emphasising their short-lived nature, and, possibly, their irrelevance. Although set in the past, the story is thus told along the lines of the cultural, religious and linguistic divide in Canada today and attempts to view it from a modern perspective. In the introductory note to the story, Atwood accurately points out that ‘such compromises, such cross-cultural alliances, are not just a mark of today’s Canadian society, but have been with us from the beginning’, a fact which her story vividly illustrates.⁸³

As with the author’s other historical re-writing, the short story raises interesting issues as to the nature of historical writing. The letters written by Marie Payzant obviously belong to the private realm of family history, as they are intended to let her children ‘know a little’ of what happened to their father. The text thus becomes the testimony of a particular witness, subjected to her personal perspective and located within a specific time and place, that of 1759 Quebec City. Marie’s account thus falls into the category of the ‘limited identities’ approach to history, a fact which is confirmed by the impact that the particular details of her background have on the content of her story. But the latter is also meant to reach beyond these specific circumstances, and to gain relevance for her descendants, among which is Atwood, but also more widely, subsequent generations of Canadians, in modern-day Canada. Atwood thus shows the importance of each individual’s personal vision of the facts in the elaboration of the ‘bigger picture’. Moreover, the continuity between past and present, a recurrent theme in Atwood’s re-writing process, is clearly illustrated through the short story’s title, ‘The Bombardment Continues’, which is in the present tense, and which emphasises the

⁸³ Margaret Atwood, ‘The Bombardment Continues’, Introductory Note, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

relentlessness of human conflicts and warfare: it seems we are forever suffering a 'bombardment'.

The short story also addresses issues related to the nature of historical writing by creating a tension between eighteenth-century accuracy and contemporary re-writing. Atwood explained in her introductory note to the story that '[a]s far as its main facts go, it is entirely true',⁸⁴ and we notice that the title is followed by an indication that the text is 'Translated from the French', which seems to emphasise the authenticity of the narrative: French-speaking Marie Payzant becomes the author of her story, which Atwood, the Anglophone writer, has only conveyed to us, intact, in English. This by no means attempts to deny the authorial process involved in an act of translation, but to show how the author of the short story is displaced, or hidden behind the (fictional) claim to a translated text. Besides, the story is written in the traditional eighteenth-century style of language and syntax, while each letter is headed by an official date, from September 8 to 18, 1759, thus locating the text within a very specific historical time period. However, this historical accuracy is undermined by the central protagonist's (modern) awareness of the process involved in history writing: when commenting upon the battle of the Conquest, she notices: 'but how can I report an occasion that I myself did not witness?' (p. 19). The obvious limitations of her vision, her being a refugee hiding behind the city walls, and not actually taking part in the combat, are acknowledged in a rather modern fashion. Moreover, when mentioning some of the superstitious beliefs surrounding the victory of the English, Marie Payzant corrects herself and adds: '[a]ll of what I set down here is rumour', for 'with any besieged as long we had been, and as hungry as we were by then, rumour has the force of a cannon' (p. 21). Her comments help raise questions as to the reliability of historical accounts by showing in what ways they are affected by their narrator's personal experience and perspective. These observations most certainly belong to Atwood's modern touch, and the text's original claim to eighteenth-century authenticity is thus counterbalanced by the author's contemporary approach.

This is also confirmed when the heroine, in a feat of remarkable religious tolerance, prays for her survival and for that of the others besieged with her, and notices that 'the same God must hear us both, as there is only One' (p. 22). The story thus strives to show in what ways the experience of enduring the battle has altered the protagonist's vision, to the point of recognising a form of religious unity between herself and those who have persecuted her,

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

precisely, for her faith. This vision seems, once again, to be enlightened by a modern understanding of religious difference, which might not have been present in an eighteenth-century version of the story. Finally, at the time of the English victory, Marie Payzant sadly notices that ‘whatever I do, I find I must betray something’ (p. 22). This lucid observation is also relevant to the modern day, where allegiances to uniform national visions are in fact shown to be composed of many different allegiances to very diverse and heterogeneous groups within that nation; this, in turn, illustrates the ‘limited identities’ approach to the understanding of the structures of the nation. As Rudyard Griffiths notes in the preface to *Story of a Nation*, the collection of stories shows that ‘history is narrative’, and that Canada’s past ‘is not something transfixed in amber, but a story that is open to us to create and recreate in the image of the values we hold important as Canadians.’⁸⁵ The narrative quality of history, and the need to re-interpret its message and re-evaluate its function, are also central to Atwood’s project in this short story, as well as in her other works under study in this thesis.

Conclusion

Atwood’s return to the past and to the lives of some of its female figures thus seems to allow her in some ways to define the present. Her re-writing of the life of Susanna Moodie is a crucial step for Atwood in the recognition of the particular factors which have helped shape Canada’s process of nation formation. The important role played by the wilderness in this process, and in particular the settler’s inability to name it and to ‘speak’ its language, is illustrated in the poem cycle by Moodie’s sense of alienation, then progressive adaptation and transformation, at its contact. Without this acceptance of the landscape, according to Atwood, no future is possible for Canada. The immigration factor, and the fact that Moodie had to negotiate the difficult passage from her mother country to her new land, and from her nineteenth-century European values to the lack of framework she found in Canada, are also expressed in the poems through the image of the settler’s divided and fragmented self. These are aspects of the Canadian experience which Atwood saw as still influencing the way in which Canadians perceived themselves and their country in the 1960s and 70s. An example of this is also found in *Grace*, where the character of Moodie comes back to the present to make her voice and opinions heard yet again.

⁸⁵ Rudyard Griffiths, *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in our History*, Preface, *Op. Cit.*, p. ix.

However, Atwood's vision has evolved over the years, as Canada's national consciousness has grown more defined. In more recent re-visitations of Moodie's work, Atwood shows a distancing from the authority of the settler's pen and a distrust of its accuracy. We notice that in later poems and short story, the author's aims have shifted to address the cause of gender inequality, and in particular to denounce women's unfair treatment and persecution in the past. This, in turn, becomes tied in with questions as to the nature of history writing, and with an emphasis upon the often biased narrative process involved in the elaboration of historical discourses. The next chapter will allow us to assess the ways in which Atwood's authorial intentions behind her historical re-writing attempts have evolved since her 1970 vision in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

Chapter Three:

Re-Defining Women's Historical Space

in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

This chapter is dedicated to the study of Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace*, and will focus especially on the ways in which the author attempts to re-write and re-interpret certain aspects of Canada's past so as to create a female historical space in which traditionally oppressed female figures are given an opportunity to make themselves heard. It will be shown how the genre of historical fiction allows Atwood to return to previous historical periods and to condemn the injustice of the centralised male historical discourse which has traditionally excluded, and kept at the periphery of its mainstream historical narratives, various minority groups, such as women, the Native population, or the working-class. *Alias Grace* is particularly significant in terms of redressing the imbalances these historical narratives have created as the novel highlights the importance of looking at history in the detail of its different actors, and of taking into account the various class, gender, and ethnic specifications attached to them. In this respect, the novel seems to be in keeping with the 'limited identities' approach to the study of Canadian history, as were the works by Atwood examined in Chapter Two.

Alias Grace relates the life story of Grace Marks, a young Irish immigrant who left her natal Ireland at the time of the famines in the hope of finding wealth and fortune in the Canadian colonies. After arriving in Toronto, she took up domestic work and spent several years enduring the particularly harsh conditions of the job. In the last household where she was to work, however, her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, were brutally murdered on July 23, 1843. Grace and James McDermott, a fellow servant, were both arrested for the crimes, as their attempted flight to the United States raised suspicion. Each accused the other of being responsible for the murders, but both were convicted and sentenced to death. Grace was only sixteen at the time. James McDermott was publicly hanged shortly after, but Grace's sentence was eventually commuted to life imprisonment, thanks to the skills of her lawyer who pleaded 'her youth, the weakness of her

sex, and her supposed witlessness'.¹ Grace was subsequently imprisoned for twenty-nine years in the Kingston Provincial Penitentiary, even though she was convicted on circumstantial grounds only, as there was no firm evidence as to her culpability. She also spent part of her detention in the Toronto Insane Asylum, for the prison authorities felt that her (allegedly) aggressive and 'mad' behaviour would be best managed at the Asylum. In 1872, she was eventually granted a pardon and freed from the Penitentiary; and in Atwood's version she marries Jamie Walsh who, as a young boy, used to live next to the Kinnear farm.

In her afterword to the novel, Atwood explained how the facts surrounding the murders were particularly sensational: Nancy Montgomery was Thomas Kinnear's mistress, and found to be pregnant at her autopsy, while Grace was 'uncommonly pretty and [...] extremely young', she and James McDermott were rumoured to be lovers.² It thus seems that 'the combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes was most attractive to the journalists of the day', as well as to Atwood, a century and a half later.³ This chapter will examine the ways in which Grace's story raises questions as to the nature of history writing, and how the novel's return to the past may have a meaning for the present. The notion of (historical) narration, and the role of the narrator, will also be explored in relation to the character of Dr. Jordan, who in the novel is researching Grace's life, while the concept of female 'bad' behaviour, mentioned earlier, will be examined in the context of Grace's own (reprehensible) actions. We will then try to assess the way in which Grace's alleged madness allows the author to denounce nineteenth-century prejudiced views pertaining to the female body and its place in society. The theme of narrative and narration will come up again through the study of the importance of Grace's needlework activities, and of her patchwork quilt-making in particular, while it will be shown how the novel's many epigraphs also constitute a form of (narrative) patchwork. Finally, we will have a look at Atwood's unpublished play *Grace*, in which the author offers an earlier version of Grace Marks's story.

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, Afterword (Virago Press, London, 1997), p. 537.

² *Ibid.*, p. 537.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 537.

***Alias Grace*, a Close Account of Life as a Servant in Nineteenth-Century Canada**

Alias Grace is a historical novel, but one with a difference: its primary aim is not to give a historical account of the period concerned, and the broader historical events which took place at the time are mentioned only in passing and kept in the background of the story. On the other hand, the minute aspects of Grace Marks's everyday life are described with abundance of detail and occupy centre stage in the narrative: the reader is thus given a first-hand account of the heroine's dire journey across the Atlantic, her arrival and first encounter with the disappointing realities of the New World, her employment as a housemaid in various households, followed by her involvement in the murders of her master and housekeeper, and finally her conviction and years of detention in the Kingston Provincial Penitentiary and in the Toronto Insane Asylum. The story of Grace's personal life thus offers a sharp insight into nineteenth-century Canadian society, and especially into life at the bottom of the Canadian social ladder. This powerfully reveals the mood of the time, and in particular the social injustices suffered by the lower classes, the prejudices that restricted women's freedom, and the state of nineteenth-century social laws. By choosing to focus on the life of a newly immigrated housemaid accused of murder, Atwood moves away from traditional historical narratives which adopt the perspectives of heads of states and political leaders. Her approach is also in keeping with the concept of 'limited identities': by looking at Canadian history through the prism of Grace's life and taking into account the particularities attached to her status as a young woman, a member of the lower working-class, and an Irish immigrant, Atwood produces a colourful depiction which is more evocative than a minute study of nineteenth-century political history. She is not interested in narrating history from a hegemonic point of view, but prefers to show how the political and social situation of the time was perceived by members of the lower classes, whose perspectives are rarely recorded in mainstream history.

One of the very few references to actual historical events deals with the 1837-38 Rebellions, which stand out as one of the marking incidents of nineteenth-century Canadian history. However, the Rebellions are only mentioned in passing, through a conversation between Grace Marks and Mary Whitney, a fellow servant who, significantly, is said to have Native ancestors. Grace finds out that one of the maids 'had become very melancholic when her young man was transported to Australia for being in the Rebellion three years before'.⁴ Grace, however, admits knowing 'nothing about the Rebellion, not having been in the country

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Virago Press, London, 1997), p. 171. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to the text will be from this edition.

at the time', and asks Mary Whitney to tell her what happened. The Canadian reader would be expected to know what happened during the Rebellions, and how they ended, but Mary Whitney's account somehow jars with the traditional version of the facts. Indeed, although it is commonly agreed today that William Lyon Mackenzie's Rebellion of 1837 was poorly supported by the population of the time, and that it misfired because his Radical claims failed to understand the basically moderate political views of his fellow Canadians,⁵ Mary claims that the Rebellion:

was against the gentry, who ran everything, and kept all the money and land for themselves; and it was led by Mr. William Lyon Mackenzie, who was a Radical, and after the Rebellion failed he escaped through ice and snow in women's clothing, and over the Lake to the States, and he could have been betrayed many times over but was not, because he was a fine man who always stood up for the ordinary farmers; but many of the Radicals had been caught and transported or hanged, and had lost their property (p. 171)

The anecdotal detail that Mackenzie dressed in 'women's clothing' in order to avoid being caught goes to show that he seriously feared for his life, and had to hide his identity: Mary's confidence in the fact that he would never have been betrayed is thus not in line with what is commonly understood today. Mary's position becomes clear when Grace asks her 'if she [is] a Radical', to which Mary replies that 'her own father had lost his farm that way', and adds threateningly that 'their time would come, they would be revenged' (pp. 171-72). Mary Whitney's opinions and ideas, by no means mainstream, thus provide an interesting and unusual perspective on the events of the time: she bears witness to an underlying current of popular protest which was mostly silenced by the leading class when the Rebellions failed, and which does not find its way into traditional historical records. Atwood seems to be going against the principle that only the political victor's perspective of the events should be recorded by history, and gives voice to an isolated and dissident group of society which is not represented in hegemonic historical accounts. Moreover, and as said above, the knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the Rebellions can be expected of a Canadian audience, but probably not of a Non-Canadian readership. However, Atwood expects her readers to know the details of these events, so as to be able to appreciate the degree to which she alters the commonly agreed version of the facts. The self-legitimising attitude inherent in this authorial choice testifies to the author's will to assume as 'central' a piece of knowledge which would otherwise be considered secondary by her international readership.

⁵ See *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, edited by James Marsh *et al* (Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, 1985), p. 1879.

A significant aspect of the novel is the fact that Mary Whitney is not the heroine of the story – nor is she an actual historical character, as this allows her to have a very controversial outlook on nineteenth-century Canadian society. She has a huge influence on Grace, and her unconventional ideas offer a clever counterbalance to Grace's more traditional and conservative values. For instance, in an interesting passage about servant labour, Mary points out to Grace that they:

[are] not slaves, and being a servant [is] not a thing [they were] born to, [...] it [is] just a job of work. [...] And one person [is] as good as the next, and on this side of the ocean folks [rise] in the world by hard work, not by who their grandfather was, and that [is] the way it should be. (p. 182)

Grace, on the other hand, still holds her European views and admits that Mary '[has] very democratic ideas, which it took [her] some getting used to' (p. 183). Mary Whitney challenges these Old World views with her own egalitarian vision of things: she claims for example that, 'being a servant [is] like anything else', as 'it [is] all in the way of looking at it'. She then goes on to illustrate her point:

For instance, we [have] been told always to use the back stairs, in order to keep out of the way of the family, but in truth it [is] the other way around: the front stairs [are] there so that the family [...] keep[s] out of *our* way. They [can] go traipsing up and down the front stairs in their fancy clothes and trinkets, while the real work of the place [goes] on behind their backs, without them getting all snarled up in it, and interfering, and making a nuisance of themselves. (p. 182)⁶

The obvious use of irony in this extract helps emphasise the importance of the work carried out by the servants in relation to their non-existent social status (they have to use the 'back stairs'). This is demonstrated further by Mary's added comment that 'although rich', their masters are 'feeble and ignorant creatures', unable to take proper care of themselves if it was not for the help of the cooks, kitchen-maids, scullery-maids, chamber-maids, laundresses, gardeners and farm-hands, to name but a few (p. 182). Mary's character speaks for the recognition of the servant class without whom, she claims, the life of the elite would have been impossible. It is, however, the elite's life and thoughts which have traditionally been recorded in historical writings. Mary's unconventional views thus help underline the basic injustice which has kept the lower classes silent and absent from historical records, in spite of their important social roles. As will be shown in Chapter Six, a similar attitude is expressed

in Anne Hébert's *Le Premier jardin*, in which the importance of the servant class in nineteenth-century Quebec is emphasised by the heroine.

Mary's radical views are also symbolically highlighted in the novel by her tragic fate and early death: she becomes pregnant from an illegitimate relationship with a 'man [who] had promised to marry her, and had given her a ring', but who goes 'back on his promise' when he discovers that she is with child (p. 200). Terrified at the prospect of being thrown out on the streets to starve if her employers find out about her 'delicate condition', Mary decides to have an abortion. The operation is secretly carried out by a surgeon showing very little medical competence, and the few horrific details given in the text emphasise the huge risks she undertakes: risks to her health, but also to her freedom, as of course, at the time, the practice was illegal and very severely punished. Moreover, shortly after going through the surgery, Mary suffers atrocious agony and dies of internal bleeding. The appalling injustice of her character's death is a powerful condemnation of the social prejudices inflicted upon women, and in particular women of the working-class, at the time. The nineteenth-century concepts of 'feminine virtue' and 'proper female behaviour' oppress Mary by leaving her with very little choice: if her illegitimate pregnancy is found out, she loses her dignity and reputation, and becomes a social outcast, as it is suggested in the text that, had she had her baby, begging or 'whoring' would have been the only means of subsistence for her. On the other hand, having an abortion means breaking the law and going against her religious beliefs, which condemn the act. It could thus be argued that Mary's death becomes an actual enactment of the figurative social 'death' she would have suffered because of her illegitimate pregnancy.

Moreover, although Mary never reveals the man's identity, the reader is given enough clues to guess that he is the son of the household in which Grace and Mary work. His privileged upper-class status allows him to remain sheltered from the consequences of his irresponsible acts as Mary refuses to give his name, scared as she is by the reprisals she would be exposed to for getting involved with someone 'above her reach'. He thus misleads and seduces Mary by giving her a golden ring which has a great symbolic importance for her, but only a little monetary value for him: his wealthy position thus comes to be associated with the desecration of traditional symbols. Besides, Mary's repeated claim that, in the New World, 'one person [is] as good as the next', is refuted as a result of her encounter with the harsh reality of social class difference, while her tragic death makes her a martyr to class and gender

⁶ Emphasis mine.

inequality. Furthermore, the fact that she claims a Native ancestry becomes crucial as it seems to link her fate to that of the original inhabitants of the land, and to denounce the cruel treatment they experienced at the hands of the colonisers.

Atwood's condemnation of nineteenth-century class and gender discrimination is also powerfully illustrated by her description of the (imagined) circumstances surrounding the murders. Grace suggests indeed that Thomas Kinnear, her master, might have sexually abused her:

Did he say, I saw you outside at night, in your nightgown, in the moonlight? Did he say, who were you looking for? Was it a man? Did he say, I pay good wages but I want good service in return? Did he say, do not worry, I will not tell your mistress, it will be our secret? Did he say, You are a good girl?

He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep. (pp. 342-43)

Atwood thus hints at the fact that Grace could have been the victim of sexual harassment, and possibly rape, from her employer, while simultaneously insinuating that this might have all been 'dreamt' by the heroine. However, the implication of a sexual attack, even if not confirmed, still conjures up the horror of the act it refers to, and suggests a situation in which Grace would have been totally powerless, due to the lack of laws on sexual crimes at the time. Consequently, the molestation Grace alludes to gives her a victim status, and an (almost justified) motive for committing the crime she is accused of, namely, murdering her employer.

The American Doctor

Alias Grace follows a rather complex narrative structure as it is told from two different perspectives: Grace Marks's own narrative voice telling the story of her life, and the voice of an omniscient narrator following the private thoughts of all the other characters of the novel, among which is Dr. Simon Jordan, a young American doctor studying mental illnesses. He works on behalf of a Committee dedicated to proving Grace Marks's innocence and obtaining her liberation, and is thus required to assess Grace's mental state, as some of the authorities believe her to be mad, and to recover the missing gaps in her memory. Indeed, in Atwood's version of the story – and to further complicate the plot – Grace suffers from memory lapses and has no recollection of what happened at the time of the murders. Dr. Jordan sees the work as an opportunity to try out new medical theories on the person of Grace, and thus

initially comes across as a young and ambitious doctor trying to make a name for himself in academia.

He begins a long series of interviews with Grace, and as Burkhard Niederhoff has pointed out, we learn about her in the novel as we follow the progress made by Dr. Jordan who is researching and reconstructing her life. Niederhoff notes how one of the most interesting aspects of this plot structure consists in the connections and echoes between the two lines of action, the researched life and the life of the researcher. This adds a self-reflexive element to the novel, which Niederhoff relates to Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction', that is, a text that foregrounds the problems associated with historical research, explanation and narrative.⁷ This in turn raises questions as to the reliability of historical narration, a trope central to Atwood's novel. Moreover, through his process of finding out about Grace's past, Dr. Jordan reveals unsuspected facets of his own character, and his particular social class, financial status, nationality and gender will be shown to have impacts upon the nature of his findings.

The act of narration in the novel thus comes to play a crucial role, and Atwood has agreed that Grace, whatever else she is, is 'a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives.'⁸ Progressively, however, the original aim of Dr. Jordan's interviews is diverted from being a simple medical experiment to becoming a display of narrative skills, as it becomes crucial for Grace to keep Dr. Jordan listening to her tale, and to construct it in such a way that will entice him to come back each day for more potential revelations. Her efforts at telling an exciting story, through selecting and shaping some of its details, raise however the problem of authenticity, as with any narrative. This is particularly visible in Grace's claim that:

Because [Dr. Jordan] was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him (p. 286)

If Grace is a storyteller, she appears to be an unreliable one, as she (purposely) confuses her listener, to draw him further into her story. The question of authenticity regarding Grace's

⁷ Burkhard Niederhoff, 'How to Do Things with History: Researching Lives in Carol Shields' *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 35, n° 2, 2000), p. 71, quoting from Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 61-77.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1515.

narrative will preoccupy Dr. Jordan – and the reader – until the end of the novel, without being really answered. Atwood explained that what Grace tells Dr. Jordan is selective and dependent on what she remembers, or on what she says she remembers: ‘how can her audience tell the difference?’, Atwood wondered.⁹ In fact, the author saw this as typical of the literature of ‘the end of the twentieth century, with [its] uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time.’¹⁰ Noticing that she could not help but be contemporary, Atwood recognised that *Alias Grace*, though set in mid-nineteenth century, was in fact a very contemporary novel. This is visible in the way in which the text underlines and questions the historiographic processes at work within any historical narratives, a recurrent concern of contemporary Canadian historical fiction. The character of Dr. Jordan, with all his revealed imperfections and limitations, crucially helps highlight the partiality involved in the elaboration of any narrative of the past. This becomes particularly obvious, for instance, in the way the physical attraction he develops for Grace affects his assessment of her mental state. Moreover, the novel is also contemporary in the way in which it features modern ideas about the past, as with the condemnation of servant class exploitation and of women’s restricted freedom. Atwood’s use of the past thus has a relevance for the present, as some of the discriminations described in the novel still take place today.

The story line of the novel also reminds one of the *Stories from 1001 Arabian Nights*, which are similarly set within the frame narrative of a female prisoner striving to survive solely through her storytelling skills. Like Scheherazade, Grace knows that her freedom depends upon the way she tells her story: for this reason, she makes it especially entertaining, but she also (purposely) leaves it incomplete, with always the promise of finishing it the following day.¹¹ Both texts feature as well an eager audience of one listening to the storyteller, namely Dr. Jordan or the sultan, both male figures with power and authority. Atwood has acknowledged that Dr. Jordan was ‘not only a more educated person than [Grace] but a man, which gave him an automatic edge in the nineteenth century’.¹² It seems interesting to consider the implications of such a choice of audience for Grace’s story, while keeping in mind that for each story there is a teller, but there is also an audience: both affect the contents of the narrative.

⁹ Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1515.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1515.

¹¹ Interestingly, in a recent BBC Radio 4 show entitled ‘Desert Island Discs’, Margaret Atwood confessed that if she had to take a single book with her on a desert island, it would have to be the *Stories from 1001 Arabian Nights*. ‘Desert Island Discs’, broadcast on April 13th 2003, BBC Radio 4.

Undoubtedly, Dr. Jordan's nationality and occupation influence his involvement in the action of the novel. In particular, the fact that he is American repeatedly has effects on his perception of life in nineteenth-century Canada: his remains an outsider's point of view, and as with Grace's original encounter with the country, Dr. Jordan emphatically underlines the differences specific to Canada. But his wealthy New-England origins, his several years of medical study in Europe, and his mingling with Kingston's local high society, all contribute to disclose the way of life of the upper-class – as opposed to that of the lower classes. Dr. Jordan gives indeed an interesting counterpart to Grace's discovery of New-World social class relations:

Simon has been spoiled by European servants, who are born knowing their places; he has not yet reaccustomed himself to the resentful demonstrations of equality so frequently practised on this side of the ocean. (p. 66)

Through such observations, based once again on daily-life experiences, in this case a troublesome servant in the service of his landlady, Dr. Jordan is able to bear witness to the emergence of a distinctly Canadian society in mid-nineteenth-century North America. Having lived in both the newly formed United States of America and Europe, his vision of Canada is thus affected by his experience of these other nations. What emerges from this is an insistence on the differences and particularities of nineteenth-century Ontario. From the weather and landscape, to the 'loyalist' political opinions and conservative social attitudes, nothing escapes Dr. Jordan during his stay in what he perceives as an alien world. But significantly, his masculine and US/European assumptions, which are traditionally considered as normative, are here challenged and questioned through his contact with the 'Other'. In fact, under cover of innocence and simple-mindedness, Grace ends up undermining Dr. Jordan's assumptions of authority and superior knowledge. This is particularly evident in their first meeting, where Dr. Jordan brings Grace an apple, as a way to earn her trust and to test her: he asks her what the apple traditionally stands for. Grace, starved by the prison regime, is grateful for the extra food, but purposely plays dumb and refuses to give him the answer he wants:

What does Apple make you think of? he says.
I beg your pardon, Sir, I say. I do not understand you. [...]

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1515.

The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige. (pp. 44-45)

Jordan is progressively undone by Grace's resistance, and his medical theories eventually prove totally ineffective in her case. It thus seems that Grace's male and validating American audience is being fooled, and found to be incompetent, through the process of her telling her story. This becomes particularly pertinent when noticing that Grace's narration is in fact contained within the larger narrative framework of Atwood's novel. Could this be an ironic *clin d'oeil* from the author to the large body of academics studying her work in literary circles south of the border? The suggestion is quite attractive, especially in light of Atwood's self-confessed problematic relationship to the United States, which she has often described as a large neo-imperial power threatening to over-shadow Canada.

Cristie March has commented upon the issue of oral communication in the novel, and has noticed that Dr. Jordan's use of language is that of a professional: he attaches linguistic significance to other characters' utterances, particularly Grace's, according to the dictates of his medical training.¹³ March adds that for the purposes of Jordan's analysis, he forces speech into significations of mental condition without regard for the speaker's conceptualisation of meaning. Crucially, during the interviews with Grace, March sees Dr. Jordan as functioning within a definition of object-word relationships that attempts to deny Grace her own system of meaning.¹⁴ This is most visible when, in an effort to draw Grace into recalling her involvement in the murders, Dr. Jordan brings her items such as fruits and vegetables for what is, in his mind, a means of word association:

Every day he has set some small object in front of her, and has asked her to tell him what it causes her to imagine. This week he's attempted various root vegetables, hoping for a connection that will lead downwards: Beet – Root Cellar – Corpses, for instance; or even Turnip – Underground – Grave. According to his theories, the right object ought to evoke a chain of disturbing associations in her (pp. 103-104)

March notes that Dr. Jordan sees the string of speech and concepts clearly, but in this instance, his method is unsuccessful. Grace chooses to withhold information, and only gives superficial answers to his inquiries: 'so far she's treated his offerings simply at their face

¹³ Cristie March, 'Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Vol. 22, n° 2, 1997), p. 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-76.

value, and all he's got out of her has been a series of cookery methods.'¹⁵ March concludes that Grace is resisting the implications of his language's meaning, and thereby renders it meaningless. As Dr. Jordan strains to decipher what Grace 'truly' is or is not saying, and as she tries to understand what he wants to hear, and to decide what she does or does not want to reveal, his use of language breaks down and is proven ineffective. In March's opinion, this breakdown occurs because Dr. Jordan does not realise that he must negotiate with Grace's words on her terms, as well as his own.¹⁶ This seems to illustrate the ways in which male hegemonic narratives have imposed their (biased) historical vision on their objects, and not subjects, of study in the past. Through Dr. Jordan's medical experiment, Grace becomes one such object, and the reader, who has access to her thoughts, is able to evaluate the degree to which Jordan's (objectifying) approach remains far from discovering any truth about her past. Atwood thus vividly illustrates her condemnation of such historical practices, and shows how ineffective they are at gaining any real insight into the past.

It seems also relevant to point out that Margaret Atwood was aware of Anne Hébert's 1970 novel *Kamouraska* when she wrote *Alias Grace*, and one may wonder to what extent Dr. Jordan could be a response to *Kamouraska*'s Dr. Nelson, the American doctor who also plays a crucial part in the story?¹⁷ Hébert's novel will be explored in depth in Chapter Four, but striking similarities do emerge between both doctors. For instance, in both cases, their American nationality affects the way in which they are perceived in the story: Dr. Jordan remains the eternal outsider in Kingston high society, and so does Dr. Nelson, in French-speaking nineteenth-century Quebec. Although described as a well-meaning idealist, his foreigner's status gives Dr. Nelson a potentially malevolent aura in Hébert's story. As with Dr. Jordan, he is seduced by his female patient whom he sees as an innocent maiden needing to be rescued, a description Dr. Jordan often applies to Grace. Nelson eventually flees back to America after having an adulterous affair with his patient, and killing her husband.

Dr. Jordan, on the other hand, appears to be threatening and potentially dangerous at first (Grace fears that he is going to carry out some painful experiments on her), but rapidly he is shown to be totally inoffensive and rather clumsy: he falls victim to Grace's (narrative) charm, is involved against his will in an adulterous affair with his landlady, and runs away back home hastily, his reputation undone and his medical expertise questioned in the process.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76, quoting from Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 104.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁷ When listing recent Canadian historical novels, Atwood remembered 'Anne Hébert's excellent *Kamouraska*, as early as 1970.' Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1510.

It could thus be argued that Atwood's American doctor is an ironic, inter-textual version of the sombre and austere character of Dr. Nelson: where the latter brings about anguish and death, and remains a threatening figure in the story, the former causes his own ridicule, while being discredited and fooled by the heroine. This instance of ironic inter-textuality seems to be in keeping with Hutcheon's concept, which she describes as a way of operating a double recognition and contesting of the cited text, a fact which is 'most often true when it is women's work that is cited, or even parodied, by women artists'.¹⁸ This seems particularly relevant in the present context, as Atwood visibly both acknowledges and recognises the worth of the work of her predecessor, but also offers an ironic re-vision of one of its characters, possibly as a way to allow the inscription of her own (historical) version.

Women Behaving Badly

Atwood's choice of a murderess for the novel's central protagonist clearly challenges traditional feminist understandings of positive female representations, an issue which has been raised earlier. Harriet Devine Jump has written about what feminists would describe as the problematic representation of Atwood's female characters.¹⁹ Devine Jump recognises that even though Atwood's heroines 'are frequently put at a disadvantage in some way by the expectations, the demands, the pressures and sometimes the violence of the male-oriented society in which they find themselves', this cannot constitute a valid explanation for the author's recurrent choice to depict 'negative' women characters.²⁰ According to the critic, a possible answer lies in the novelist's refusal to simplify gender issues, as seen in her 1978 article 'The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School', where Atwood denounces what she sees as a feminist view that women in novels should be ideal role models.²¹ This issue of 'role model', and more generally that of writing female characters into fiction, has raised particular difficulties for Atwood, enough for the author to declare that '[f]or a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals, women merely as examples of a gender; perhaps it is time to take the capital W off Woman.'²²

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁹ Harriet Devine Jump, 'Margaret Atwood: Taking the Capital W off Woman', *Diverse Voices: Essays on Twentieth-Century Women Writers in English*, edited by Harriet Devine Jump (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1991), pp. 98-121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²¹ Margaret Atwood, 'The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School', *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1982), pp. 215-28.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

It is with this entreaty in mind that we must approach Atwood's depiction of Grace Marks, and deal with her choice of a heroine who is possibly a liar, a murderess and a madwoman. How can Atwood's denunciation of nineteenth-century gender discrimination be empowered by a historical fiction centring on a controversial character whose actions are shown to be far from irreproachable? As with the characters of Françoise Laurent and Mary Webster in previous poems, it is a crucial aspect of *Alias Grace* that its heroine should be a prison convict accused of murder – as well as, occasionally, a patient of the Insane Asylum. When it comes to Grace's innocence, mystery and doubt persist throughout the novel, and significantly, there is no clear evidence in Atwood's work as to whether Grace was involved, or not, in the two shocking murders described. The question of her guilt haunts the entire narrative but remains unanswered. It seems in fact that the novel's central enigma is purposely not resolved: the reader is thus left to consider all the other side issues which might have played a part in Grace's conviction.

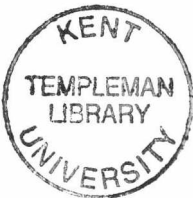
For instance, to what degree were her coveting of a social position above her rank, together with her extreme youth and uncommon beauty perceived as a dangerous threat to social order? What influence did the social conventions of the time have in her condemnation? Was she being punished for running away with a fellow servant with whom she was not married? Was she judged guilty of 'immodest' behaviour as well as murder? Did being an Irish immigrant play against her? These numerous questions each raise a different aspect of the problem, and help understand the extent to which the representation of Grace Marks as a murderess/madwoman powerfully enables the author's criticism of nineteenth-century social, racial and sexist prejudices. Atwood mentions the fact, for instance, that Grace's gender had a very strong influence on the verdict of her trial, and that her lawyer (shamelessly) drew on conventional perceptions of gender stereotypes for his defence of the case. He associated her youth and uncommon beauty with simple-mindedness, using the popular generalisation that beautiful women could not be expected to be clever as well, in order to convince the jury that Grace would have been unable to hatch a murderous plot, and that any involvement she might have had in the murders was against her will, or accidental: his plea was successful.

Atwood also explained in her afterword that, although the Montgomery murder took place before Kinnear's, and although both deaths caused horror and shock, only the Kinnear murder was actually tried: since both of the accused were condemned to death, it was felt that

a trial for Montgomery's death was unnecessary.²³ One cannot help wonder whether this decision was influenced by the fact that Nancy was a member of the lower working class: it seems indeed that the two deaths were judged differently according to the social background of the victim. These types of gender and class-related inequalities are emphatically highlighted and denounced through Atwood's treatment of the nineteenth-century murder case. The modern glance she casts on the latter thus leads her narrative away from mainstream or hegemonic historical points of view, and allows her to powerfully reveal the social injustices suffered by the lower classes, the prejudices restricting women's freedom, and the state of Canada's legal system in the nineteenth century.

Female Madness in Nineteenth-Century Canada

Grace's fifteen-month stay at the Toronto Insane Asylum provides a way to illustrate, and condemn, Canada's inadequate social laws at the time. Through the tropes of female madness, hysteria, and their nineteenth-century (mis)representations, the author examines the ways in which insanity was often culturally and socially constructed. In the novel, Grace is sent to the Asylum because she allegedly has an aggressive and unmanageable behaviour in prison, and the novel's narrative neither confirms nor denies her violence, but describes her as having occasional seizure fits and fainting spells. Although the story starts many years after Grace's stay at the Asylum, and although she has now returned to normal detention, the opening scene of the novel introduces right away the subject of her mental health. Grace has agreed to have her head measured by a doctor who claims 'he can tell from the bumps on [her skull] what sort of [criminal she is]' (p. 31). Her female convict status, doubled with her alleged madness, make a perfect object for the doctor's experiment. The test is however abruptly interrupted by Grace's frantic cries and violent fit: she screams that 'it's the same doctor, the same one, the very same black-coated doctor with his bagful of shining knives' (p. 32). As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that this is a reference to Mary Whitney's failed abortion, and to the incompetent doctor who carried it out. The figure of the male doctor in the novel, together with the trope of scientific experimentation upon female patients, are thus used to illustrate and condemn the gender-prejudiced medical views which have victimised women in the past.



²³ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, Afterword, *Op. Cit.*, p. 537.

It is also suggested in the text that the heroine's fear of the medical world is linked to her forced detention at the Toronto Insane Asylum, which left her with very bitter memories. Grace claims indeed that the doctors at the Asylum:

wouldn't know mad when they saw it in any case, because a good portion of the women in the Asylum were no madder than the Queen of England. Many were sane enough when sober, as their madness came out of a bottle, [...] one of them was in there to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up; and another said she went mad in the autumns, as she had no house and it was warm in the Asylum, [...] but then in the spring she would become sane again because it was good weather and she could go off and tramp in the woods and fish, and as she was part Red Indian she was handy at such things. (p. 34)

Grace's sarcastic remarks underline how, in the nineteenth century, the term 'madwoman' was loosely applied to any female individual who did not fit the very strict social criteria of proper female behaviour. Public drunkenness for instance, or living in the woods, would not have constituted acceptable female behaviour in the nineteenth century. According to Grace's comments, the Asylum also offered the only solution to domestic violence, and in the context of an era during which it was still possible for any woman to be institutionalised upon the demand of her husband or relatives without any justification, Grace's observations take on a sharper edge. The obvious irony in her appraisal of the doctors' diagnoses powerfully reveals the inadequacies of their medical knowledge. Nineteenth-century social laws also come under accusation for offering no protection to battered women, but condoning their violent husbands. The extract above thus illustrates effectively the claim that madness is culturally and socially defined.

Moreover, in the context of a colonial society, the Asylum becomes also a way of channelling and containing society's 'heterogeneous' elements, as suggested by the case of the woman who is made 'Other' by her unusual lifestyle (living in the woods), and by her mixed ethnic background (she is part Red Indian). In *Double Crossings: Madness, Sexuality and Imperialism*, Anne McClintock looks at nineteenth-century representations of race, gender and madness, and brings to light the link between sexuality and female madness. McClintock illustrates her claim with the example of the Mental Deficiency Act which was passed in Britain as late as 1913, and which gave local authorities the right to lock unwed mothers in mental institutions, often for life and without appeal. These women had got pregnant outside of marriage, and in many cases through rape, but as McClintock points out

this was mostly overlooked: they were judged to be sexually 'immoral'.²⁴ Quoting from Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, McClintock reminds us that in the Victorian era 'uncontrolled sexuality seemed the major, almost defining symptom of insanity in women.'²⁵ After 1859, however, and with the emergence of 'Darwinian' psychiatry, McClintock recognises that mental illness became not only a condition of sexual deviance but also of racial deviance. She describes how committing Native women to mental asylums went hand in hand with the imposition of imperial rule over the newly conquered territories. The colonial enterprise thus saw mental institutions as crucial 'civilising' tools for the colonies.²⁶

The link between female sexuality and insanity is also made clear in Grace's narrative through her mention of the fact that the medical superintendent at the Asylum might have sexually abused her. This is corroborated by the fact that when she left the Asylum, there were fears that she might have been pregnant. Luckily this turned out to be unfounded, but it nevertheless raised questions as to who could have impregnated Grace, when she was interned in the single sex female ward? Atwood attempts to denounce the scientific misconceptions of nineteenth-century psychiatrists by showing that instead of madwomen with violent behaviours and uncontrollable sexualities, it was the ill-intentioned doctors who took advantage of their patients' supposed excessive sexual appetite in order to satisfy their own needs. The author also condemns the abusive power of these doctors who devised medical theories which had for their purpose the control of women's sexuality. She describes the vicious circle in which the female patients at the Asylum found themselves: whatever protest or complaint they might raise against the improper behaviour of their psychiatrist, they would not have been believed, and their complaints would have been effectively dismissed by the doctors and described as 'hysterical lies', or cases of 'nymphomania', both traditionally thought to be female mental disorders of sexual origin.

In fact, Atwood's description of the conditions of life at the Asylum, and her condemnation of the practices of some of its ill-intentioned doctors, seem to be informed by recent research on the cultural history of female madness. Elaine Showalter links feminist academic interest in female mental disorders, such as hysteria, to the writing of women's history. She notices how early in the women's liberation movement, reclaiming the hostile

²⁴ Anne McClintock, *Double Crossings: Madness, Sexuality and Imperialism* (Ronsdale Press, Vancouver, 2001), p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11, quoting from Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (Virago Press, London, 1985), p. 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

labels attached to rebellious or deviant women became a popular feminist strategy. Showalter adds that although 'hysteria' like 'witchcraft' had always been pejorative, it became a positive term for those trying to write the 'herstory' of hysteria,²⁷ but also for those, like Atwood and Hébert, who questioned traditional understandings of gender representations through their literary work. In Atwood's version of Grace Marks's story, the heroine does present signs of what nineteenth-century medical science would describe as 'hysteria', a disease which for centuries had been the quintessential female malady, the very name of which derived from the Greek *hysteron*, or womb.²⁸ Elaine Showalter notices how by the end of the nineteenth century, hysteria had assumed a central role in definitions of femininity and female sexuality, as it was felt that the disorder was linked to the essence of the 'feminine' in a number of ways: its vast, unstable repertoire of emotional and physical symptoms (fits, fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing, laughing, paralysis), and the rapid passage from one to other, suggested to nineteenth-century physicians the 'lability and capriciousness traditionally associated with the feminine nature'.²⁹ Other symptoms could also include speech impediment, hallucination and memory lapses, all of which are experienced by Grace in the novel. The heroine is also called a 'hysteric' by the matrons of the Kingston Penitentiary, and suffers from a severe loss of memory relating to the circumstances of the murders.

Grace shows as well signs of a multiple or dissociative identity disorder, a disease frequently diagnosed in women in the nineteenth century.³⁰ She claims to be Mary Whitney, her deceased friend and fellow servant, both at the time of her arrest and during the session of hypnotism she undergoes later on in order to retrieve the missing gaps in her memory. It thus seems that through the description of Grace's case, Atwood challenges and undermines nineteenth-century medical misconceptions about women's bodies and minds. In this context, it is fitting that the author should invent the character of Dr. Simon Jordan, the young aspiring psychiatrist engaged to probe the recesses of Grace's (guilty) mind. Atwood has explained that she created Dr. Jordan as a way to represent 'the other side of the Victorian attitude towards madness – not the popular Ophelia-like image, but the body of medical and scientific opinion on the subject'.³¹ Dr. Jordan's technique is to interview Grace and, most importantly, to carefully listen to her and record what she has to say. This method is described as

²⁷ Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (Picador, London, 1997), p. 54.

²⁸ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰ Hilde Staels, 'Intertexts of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Vol. 46, n° 2, 2000), p. 437.

³¹ Margaret Atwood, 'Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For', from www.owtoad.com/opphelia.html (September 6th 2002).

groundbreaking in the novel, and reminds one of Dr. Sigmund Freud's innovative 'talking cure', which he developed in the late nineteenth century.³² Showalter explains that Freud experimented with new ways of dealing with hysteria. Previously, doctors such as Jean-Martin Charcot in the Paris hospital of the *Salpêtrière*, had shown that hysterics needed to be tamed and contained, and while he remains famous for having photographed his female patients having fits of hysteria, he paid in fact very little attention to what they were saying. The patients were the objects of techniques of moral management or of photographic representation, but they were mostly silenced.³³ Atwood's awareness of this coercive attitude towards female mental patients is indicated by the inclusion in one of the novel's epigraphs of an extract from *Beeton's Book of Household Management*, section on 'hysterics':

Hysterics – These fits take place, for the most part, in young, nervous, unmarried women. ... Young women, who are subject to these fits, are apt to think that they are suffering from 'all the ills that flesh is heir to;' and the false symptoms of disease which they show are so like the true ones, that it is often exceedingly difficult to detect the difference. [...]

- Isabella Beeton,
Beeton's Book of Household Management, 1859-61. (p. 157)

Isabella Beeton's definition constitutes a very good example of hostile nineteenth-century attitudes to hysteria, showing that women as well as men had a negative and dismissive approach to the disorder. Her linking of hysteria with female sexuality, as suggested by the term 'unmarried', illustrates the medical myth that women whose reproductive system was not active were more prone to hysteria. Moreover, the insinuation that the fits are fake and the hysteric a malingerer were also common ways of dealing with the symptoms of a disease which was considered to be the fruit of 'feminine imagination'. A similarly repressive approach is described in *Alias Grace*, where the Penitentiary matrons tell the Governor's wife that Grace 'used to be prone to [fits]', but that they 'never indulged her, [and] worked to correct it' (p. 33).

In contrast to these attitudes, Elaine Showalter notices how Freud presented a sympathetic and even admiring view of hysterical women; she observes how, with Freud, women's voices, stories, memories, dreams, and fantasies entered the medical record. It was the beginning of psychoanalysis, with intimate conversations between hysterical women and

³² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 155.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

male psychiatrists, dialogues rather than exhibitions.³⁴ Dr. Simon Jordan, through his daily listening sessions with Grace, offers indeed a more understanding treatment of her condition. Jordan's 'new' methods, which he tries out on Grace, can easily be seen as the precursors of modern psychoanalysis, a fact which is reinforced through the indication that he carried out observation work in mental institutions in France, Germany and Switzerland – locations where nineteenth-century medical research on diseases of the mind was the most advanced. He believes that Grace might have suffered some traumatic experiences in her past, which could explain her memory blocks, and asks her to go back to the time of her early childhood, thoroughly scanning her life up until the day of the murders to look for any unusual or suspicious event which might have been at the origin of her memory lapses.

Hilde Staels notices that the 'analyst-detective, Simon, searches for "some hidden but essential fact" beneath the endless "realistic" details' Grace gives in her narrative.³⁵ Jordan's approach to 'Grace's unconscious mind is purely scientific and mechanistic, for he desires to fix its processes objectively', to make a 'study' of Grace, to know her 'character': 'is she in essence good or evil, sane or insane?'³⁶ Yet he cannot recover the missing memory because 'the truth eludes him', and reason does not win over chaos.³⁷ Grace's character thus resists being pinned down, and her narrative cannot be fixed to a single meaning, but develops into several versions. This becomes visible during the hypnosis session Grace's liberation committee suggests, after Dr. Jordan's methods fail. While in trance, Grace 'becomes' her deceased friend Mary Whitney, and reveals that her 'Mary persona' did kill Nancy Montgomery. Mary, the rebellious servant with Native blood, is thus posited as Grace's double, and one of her many 'aliases'. The multitude of facets to Grace's personality, and the multitude of versions to her story, seem to illustrate the fact that no historical account can be single and definite, but that it is always mediated through narratives which can be contradictory, fragmented, or illogical.³⁸

Moreover, in the context of a novel permeated with the themes of hysteria and psychoanalysis, it seems unlikely to be mere coincidence that one of the secondary characters should be named Dora, without there being any implicit reference to Freud's patient of the same name. In Atwood's story, Dora is the maid-of-all-work in the service of Dr. Jordan's

³⁴ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 155-57.

³⁵ Hilde Staels, 'Intertexts of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 435, quoting from Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Bloomsbury, London, 1996), p. 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 435, quoting from Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Bloomsbury, London, 1996), p. 407.

landlady, and, as already mentioned, she is only a secondary (and fictional) character; yet, she instantly focuses the reader's attention through the description of the deep frustration she causes Dr. Jordan. This is visible in the portrait he gives of her, where he emphatically 'de-feminises' her:

Dora is stout and pudding-faced, with a small downturned mouth like that of a disappointed baby. Her large black eyebrows meet over her nose, giving her a permanent scowl that expresses a sense of disapproving outrage. (p. 65)

It is interesting to note Dora's scowling expression, and her sense of perpetual outrage, as the resistance Dr. Jordan encounters with Dora, if only on a domestic level, could be echoing the professional frustration the real Dora caused the real nineteenth-century psychoanalyst, Dr. Freud. The young woman treated by Freud was in fact called Ida Bauer, but he re-named her 'Dora' for his 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria'.³⁹ Dora was a bright eighteen-year old girl whose intellectual faculties were so to speak 'frozen' by the mind-numbing daily routine of a life confined to the realm of the domestic. She was denied any rights to privacy and personal freedom by her father, and started developing signs of 'hysteria', such as a complete loss of speech. She was therefore referred to Dr. Freud and became his patient. But by then, Showalter notices that Freud's initial openness to women's words and feelings had become codified in the interests of his emerging psychoanalytic system. During his handling of Dora's case, he became eager to penetrate the sexual mysteries of her hysterical symptoms and to dictate their meanings to her; but significantly he ignored the social circumstances of her life.⁴⁰ Showalter adds that in Freud's view, Dora's hysteria came from masturbatory fantasies, incestuous desires for her father, and possible homosexual or bisexual wishes. Dora responded to these insistent interpretations with denials at first, and with breaking off the analysis eventually, however, she remained a neurotic patient for the rest of her life.⁴¹ Showalter concludes that:

³⁸ This is also visible in the novel's trope of multiple identity, as seen with the character of Jeremiah the peddler, who becomes Dr. Jerome DuPont, a 'respected' hypnotist.

³⁹ See Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', *Case Histories I: 'Dora' and 'Little Hans'*, edited by James Strachey and Angela Richards (Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 8, Penguin Books, London, 1977), pp. 31-164.

⁴⁰ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 158-59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

Freud failed Dora because he was too quick to impose his own language on her mute communications. His insistence on the sexual origins of hysteria blinded him to the social factors contributing to it.⁴²

This male imposition of meaning upon female language is reminiscent of Dr. Jordan's own objectifying, and ineffective, approach to the study of Grace; the character of Dora in the novel, even though confined to the background to the story, thus helps conjure up suggestions of failed mental treatment and medical incompetence. Showalter points out that Dora still constitutes today one of Freud's most compelling cases for modern feminists, while in her 1997 work *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, she dedicates a whole section to Dora's case, entitled 'Dora Returns'.⁴³ She observes that a century after Freud treated or mistreated her, Dora returned as a cult heroine of literary criticism, and especially feminist criticism: psychiatrists and literary critics have written more on Dora than on any other hysterical case, while she has also been the heroine of plays, and has appeared in movies about Freud. In Showalter's words, Dora has 'become a saint in the pantheon of feminist martyrs'.⁴⁴ This gives an indication of the extent to which the story of Dora has inspired a diversity of critical and creative responses over the years, and seems to reinforce the relevance of the inclusion of a 'Dora' character in Atwood's novel.

It is interesting to note, for instance, that Dr. Jordan does also read handmaid Dora in sexual terms, most clearly so when he attempts to imagine her as a prostitute, a job alternative for her, according to him, in view of his dissatisfaction with her service as a house-maid. It seems Dr. Jordan's eagerness to master Dora, and his inability to do so, prompt him to reduce her to a sexual commodity, or to a 'disappointed baby', thus denying her a possibly threatening womanhood, as seen in the extract above. Her scowling expression and 'sense of disapproving outrage' suggest that she could be a re-creation of the real nineteenth-century Dora, returning to avenge herself from the male doctor who failed her. She clearly seems to have a hidden agenda right from the beginning of the novel, as indicated by the fact that she 'returns [Dr. Jordan's] lack of esteem', and 'appears to feel that he has rented these rooms with the sole object of causing trouble for her' (p. 66). She also undermines his self-confidence when his psychoanalytical technique proves ineffective in his study of Grace, by persistently showing him a lack of respect and admiration, to the bewilderment of Dr. Jordan

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴³ Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 57-59.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57. Hélène Cixous also famously asked in her work *The Newly Born Woman* (1975) 'what woman is not Dora?', thus symbolically extending Dora's plight to all women throughout the ages. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986), p. 147.

who feels these are owed to him. Dora is also an active element in Dr. Jordan's undoing, as she sets about spreading rumours regarding his illegitimate (and unwilling) affair with his married landlady and, eventually, destroys his virtuous character and brings about his complete loss of credibility. In the puritan context of nineteenth-century Ontario, he is then left with no alternative but to run away before the landlady's husband comes back, and before Grace's liberation committee confronts him. Dora thus makes the young aspiring psychiatrist look rather like a fraud and an ineffective doctor, while the real nineteenth-century Dora also seems to have shown the limitations of Dr. Freud's psychoanalytical methods.

As mentioned previously, the novel's twentieth-century response to the nineteenth-century misconceptions about female madness, and more generally about gender roles, seems to draw another inter-textual parallel: the representation of Grace as a lunatic was indeed the work of nineteenth-century author Susanna Moodie, who visited Grace Marks at the Toronto Insane Asylum and who wrote about the signs of insanity she displayed in *Life in the Clearings*. In Atwood's text, Grace flatly denies ever having been mad and questions the accuracy of the doctors' diagnosis, as seen earlier. It thus seems that *Alias Grace* attempts to write back to the nineteenth-century Canadian classic, and to redress the injustice of the prejudiced portrait Moodie gave of Grace. Therefore, Atwood's novel strives to give a more understanding version of the life of this female character accused of madness, and, through her, of that of all the women who have been victimised in the past by misconstrued gender-biased beliefs.

Grace's Needlework Activities

Significantly in the novel, during Dr. Jordan's daily 'listening' sessions with Grace, she is always sewing or embroidering when she talks to him, and her needlework comes to be seen as a visual metaphor for her storytelling activity. In particular, Grace's inter-weaving of threads of different colours becomes associated in the reader's mind with the stitching together of different incidents from her past so as to construct her narrative. Moreover, her choice to use one piece of material instead of another for the patchwork quilt she is making can be compared to the way in which she selects and shapes the elements she chooses to include in her story, thus drawing a clear parallel between her patchwork quilt and her narrative. Besides, both patchwork making and storytelling are activities performed in function of the 'aesthetic effect' achieved by their respective result, at the expense, perhaps, of faithfulness to the truth in the case of the story told: this seems to highlight the fact that

Grace is primarily concerned with the way the finished ‘product’ will look, and that she elaborates it accordingly. The self-consciousness inherent in this attitude reminds one of Linda Hutcheon’s notion of historiographic meta-fiction: while creating her story, the heroine shows a (post-modern) awareness of the techniques involved in the storytelling process, which are then illustrated metaphorically through the description of the techniques she uses in her needlework activities. As a result, the reliability of Grace’s story, and more generally that of historical narratives, is questioned, while Grace the seamstress and Grace the storyteller symbolically become one, Grace the artist, herself working within the larger framework of Atwood’s own artistic creation. Like her character, the author tells her story through the act of ‘sewing’ together various pieces of writing which she selects in order to create an aesthetic whole – that is, her novel. The trope of the female artist working within the larger framework of the (female) author’s creation is recurrent in the works under study in this thesis; yet, the complex narrative structure of *Alias Grace*, together with the novel’s theme of narration, both in terms of storytelling and needlework, offer a particularly elaborate version of that trope, by expressing it both at the level of form and at that of content.⁴⁵

The metaphor of the patchwork quilt is indeed central to the novel and provides an actual representation of the author’s attempt to include all of history’s different actors, and particularly those who have traditionally been excluded. The image of the patchwork thus comes to be seen as a collection of ‘limited identities’ which allow a bigger picture to emerge, while also highlighting the gathering of the diverse stories and discourses which are necessary to the construction of any historical narrative. Unlike historical studies which remain on the surface of the past and miss the set of influential elements behind historical events, or, in the case of Grace’s story, the tensions at the origin of the murders, Atwood’s narrative prompts us to look more closely at the details of the multitude of various, smaller fragments which compose the patchwork. Significantly, sewing, weaving and making patchwork quilts are typically feminine and domestic activities which are not highly valued in the world outside the home, and in the political spheres of the history making process.⁴⁶ In Atwood’s text

⁴⁵ The artistic link between storytelling and needlework was also drawn by Alice Walker in her 1974 essay ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens’, where the author notices that the making of patchwork quilts and the oral tradition of storytelling was a way for nineteenth-century black American women to escape the harsh conditions of life they were subjected to, and to have an outlet for their stifled creative expression. She contrasts in particular the ‘bits and pieces of worthless rags’ these women used, ‘the only materials [they] could afford’, to the striking results they achieved ‘in the only medium [their] position in society allowed [them] to use’, namely the making of quilts. Alice Walker, ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens’, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (The Women’s Press, London, 1984), p. 239.

⁴⁶ See Lizbeth Goodman, ‘Madwomen and Attics: Themes and Issues in Women’s Fiction’, *Literature and Gender*, edited by Lizbeth Goodman (Routledge, London, 1996), p. 112.

however, sewing and patchwork making provide the central structure which links and articulates the different narrative threads of the story.

Magali Cornier Michael has pointed out how in choosing patchwork quilting as a metaphor and model for an alternative form with which to think about and reconstruct the past, the novel participates both in current reconceptualisations of history, and in the re-evaluation of a form traditionally associated with women and disassociated from the serious and valued realms of official history and art.⁴⁷ Michael adds that *Alias Grace*'s patchwork form 'operates as a multipronged challenge to conventional history in its implicit rejection of [...] linearity'.⁴⁸ Indeed, unlike the traditional process of history making, the patchwork proceeds in 'a more spatial and weblike manner, operating on multiple dimensions rather than the unidimension of the line'.⁴⁹ Michael also observes that the idea of 'large-scale coherence' is often destabilised in quilt patterns that depend on 'point of view or optical illusion, so that, depending on where the viewer stands or on which color(s) the viewer focuses, the overall pattern changes'.⁵⁰ Therefore, through its juxtaposition of multiple contrasting narratives, Michael finds that Atwood's novel demonstrates how 'singling out any one strand of narrative and allowing it to dominate one's reading or view results in a particular but always partial overall pattern or version of events'.⁵¹ Michael thus concludes that *Alias Grace* enacts 'the impossibility of locating one overall or definitive pattern or version of events'.⁵²

Similarly, Jennifer Murray observed how in the basic structure of the quilt metaphor there is a tension between the 'one' and the 'many'. In Murray's opinion, the patchwork quilt – which she relates to the Canadian mosaic – is particularly 'well-suited to represent this tension, since, as a work in progress, it acknowledges diversity, yet as a finished product, it becomes a cover, a blanket; something which, to function effectively, must emphasise its unity'.⁵³ Murray adds that the quilt can therefore be seen as a uniform object in spite of fragmentation, or as an object of division in spite of assembly. She finds the metaphor 'deliberately ambiguous, allowing for and even encouraging the simultaneous consideration of opposing points of view'.⁵⁴ The link between quilt making and narration is also made

⁴⁷ Magali Cornier Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Vol. 47, n° 2, 2001), p. 426.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁵³ Jennifer Murray, 'Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Vol. 26, n° 1, 2001), p. 78.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

apparent through the novel's arrangement into fifteen chapters, each chapter being called after a particular patchwork pattern, such as 'Jagged Edge', 'Rocky Road', or 'Young Man's Fancy', which Jennifer Murray identifies as taken from traditional Canadian designs. She makes explicit the relation between the quilting motif and Canadian cultural inheritance, showing how the patchwork metaphor translates Atwood's 'enthusiasm for an epoch, a culture, a past that is shared national property'.⁵⁵ Moreover, each chapter-title page is adorned with the drawing of a patchwork pattern – the one matching the chapter's title. Therefore, although actual patchwork making is only mentioned on a couple of instances in the novel, it nevertheless seems to symbolically punctuate the entire narrative. Margaret Rogerson notes that the graphic presentation of these quilt patterns which appear throughout the text introduces 'the sections of the novel as separate patterns that are to be fitted into a whole'.⁵⁶ Atwood's extensive use of the quilt metaphor suggests indeed for Rogerson that 'the reading of the novel is equivalent to the making up and assembly of the fifteen patterns presented in the book'.⁵⁷ She sees the reader as a quilt-maker in the process of 'interpreting the novel, and, as with the transformation of the block patterns into a finished quilt, readings will vary according to the individual responses to the materials that have been provided'.⁵⁸

Significantly, quilt making, if only mentioned on a couple of instances, does take place at crucial moments of the narrative: not only during Grace's daily sessions with Dr. Jordan, but also at the very end of the novel, thus providing a final metaphor for the story. After she has been granted a pardon and is free to leave the Penitentiary, one of the first things Grace does is to make a quilt for herself. Interestingly, the pattern she selects is the 'Tree of Paradise', which is also the title of the final chapter of the novel. The 'Tree of Paradise', with its associated myth of Adam and Eve, is an underlying theme in the novel: it is evoked through the apple Dr. Jordan gives Grace on their first meeting, and also conjures up images of the female temptress, the *femme fatale* at the origin of the fall of mankind. Grace is suspected of being one such character throughout the story, a fact which is neither confirmed, nor totally denied; the final scene of the novel seems however to give an indication of Grace's culpability, as she explains how:

three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat [...] that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded yellowish, from the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵⁶ Margaret Rogerson, 'Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 33, n° 1, 1998), p. 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

prison night-dress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away.

I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern.

And so we will all be together. (p. 534)

The act of embroidering in order to 'blend' is crucial here, as it appears to be a final *clin d'oeil* from the heroine, who seems to have metaphorically 'embroidered' around the various pieces of her narrative, so as to blend them in a believable 'whole'. It becomes also quite significant that one of the first things Grace's newly-gained freedom enables her to do is make a quilt in which she brings together the woman whose murder she was accused of, the woman she claimed took possession of her persona while the murder took place, and the female prisoner she herself became. It seems strange, however, that Grace should want to remind herself of Nancy, whose image she has been haunted with, and has desperately tried to fight off throughout the novel.⁵⁹ The fact that Grace inserts a fragment of Nancy's dress in her quilt seems to indicate that she is finally able to control her (guilt-ridden) visions of Nancy's agonising body, and to look at the dress in which she ran away after the murders with apparently no remorse or scruples. Moreover, her wish to include a piece of her prison dress also seems quite surprising when, just previously, she had admitted being prone to horrific nightmares, in which she thought she was still in prison. One may thus wonder why she should want a reminder of her prison days on display in the bedroom of her free home, where the quilt is destined to go. It seems the inclusion of these fragments of fabric in a patchwork quilt which symbolically comes to represent her life-story, constitutes a coded avowal of guilt, an admission on Grace's part that certain aspects of her past have been far from irreproachable. She however assumes control over these controversial elements and, metaphorically, over Mary and Nancy, by silencing them and putting them to rest in her patchwork quilt.

Grace finally adds that 'on [her] Tree of Paradise, [she] intend[s] to put a border of snakes entwined', which 'will look like vines [...] to others, [...] but they will be snakes to [her]; as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing' (p. 534). Grace's ironic remark seems to be made in relation to the novel's narrative, and her view that a little bit of 'evil' is necessary to any story makes one wonder to what degree she is

⁵⁹ The novel opens indeed with Grace in the prison yard, where she suddenly sees 'Nancy, on her knees, with her hair fallen over and the blood running down into her eyes' (p. 6).

admitting having played that part in the novel. Jennifer Murray sees this final quilt as a form of solution to the alienating effect of Grace's ultimate situation, that is, being married to Jamie Walsh, a man she has neither chosen nor loves.⁶⁰ She finds, however, a 'distinct fatalism' to her situation where, 'having achieved a sense of heightened awareness of the conditions of [her] existence', the heroine does not become an active agent in her own life, but only a more perceptive observer.⁶¹ According to Murray, the absence of dynamism in the novel's ending gives the impression that 'Grace is neither truly alive nor truly dead'.⁶² I would argue, on the contrary, that the novel ends on an enigmatic, rather than un-dynamic, note. Through the image of the quilt in process, an active course of action, the reader is invited to guess which final direction the narrative will take, while Grace appears to be secretly, but actively, defying nineteenth-century social values, and to be offering resistance to their annihilating effects. Her last words seem to be a proof that her apparent submission to these nineteenth-century moral codes is in fact only a pretence, and possibly a way to better achieve her ends and enjoy her freedom.

The themes of needlework activities, female madness and the figure of the female artist are also brought together in interesting ways in the novel. Many feminist critical readings of the trope of female madness have indeed associated it with the conflicting tensions between women's artistic sensibilities and their domestic responsibilities. The female artist has often been described as a figure repressed by the patriarchal world of men's artistic expression, and confined to the realm of the home, where needlework is one of the few forms of 'artistic' activity available to women. In nineteenth-century literary tradition, the link between female madness and needlework is also visible in such poems as Lord Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', where the central figure, a tapestry weaver, is confined to an enclosed space and passively working at her loom, locked away from the natural world and from her own sexuality. The poem reaches a tragic climax when the knight the Lady loves returns: she leaves her confinement, but finds herself unable to resolve her conflicting desires and tensions, while her contact with the outside world eventually brings about her death. Her decision to break free from her (domestic) confinement thus comes to be seen as a metaphorical suicide, a concept which is useful in our study of the novel. Moreover, *Alias Grace*'s extensive use of references to, and quotations from, canonical Victorian poets seems to create a meta-narrative of inter-textual allusions which will be further examined in the next

⁶⁰ Jennifer Murray, 'Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 79.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

section. Suffice to say, however, that the sad and mysterious figure of the Lady of Shalott offers an interesting means of grasping some of that inter-textuality, in terms of the themes of madness, art and needlework.

Indeed, the poem inspired many paintings by Victorian artists, such as the Pre-Raphaelite painters, but one of the first known illustrations of the Lady of Shalott is by Elizabeth Siddal, who both painted her and posed as a model for husband Dante Gabriel Rossetti's own paintings of the Lady.⁶³ Not surprisingly, Siddal is said to have identified with the Lady and her entrapment, and her unusual position, split between the roles of (active) female artist and (passive) artist's model, is highlighted by her tragic fate: she took her own life, aged only thirty-three.⁶⁴ The figure of Siddal comes to be associated with *Alias Grace* through the fact that her portrait, painted by Rossetti, features on the cover illustration of most editions of the novel (see Figures 3 and 4). It is a striking painting, done in fiery hues of ochre, orange and maroon, and representing Siddal looking rather sombre and severe: her eyes are semi-closed and glancing downwards, her eyebrows are slightly frowning, and her mouth is resolutely tight shut. Her fair complexion and head of dark red hair help suggest that the portrait could be Grace Marks's, the Irish heroine of the novel. This is reinforced by the fact that a few editions of the novel have chosen to superimpose prison bars on the portrait (see Figures 5, 6 and 7). The choice of this painting for the novel's cover thus seems to draw inter-textual and inter-visual links between Grace Marks and Elizabeth Siddal: Grace somehow becomes the Victorian model and artist, while her closed expression gives the impression that she is trying to avoid the gaze of the male artist painting her, the stare of the audience judging her at her trial, and the watchful eyes of the male psychiatrist probing her mind in prison.⁶⁵ These side references thus help paint the complex and manifold backdrop against which Grace's story is to be read; however, unlike typical nineteenth-century literary seamstresses and madwomen, whose expected fate is, somehow, to commit suicide, it seems Grace has managed to subvert the system and to get away with it: the final image of the heroine is one of quiet celebration and victory.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

⁶³ Lizbeth Goodman, 'Madwomen and Attics: Themes and Issues in Women's Fiction', *Op. Cit.*, p. 111.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶⁵ The fact that Atwood designed the cover of her *Journals of Susanna Moodie* strongly suggests that she was also involved in choosing *Alias Grace*'s cover design.

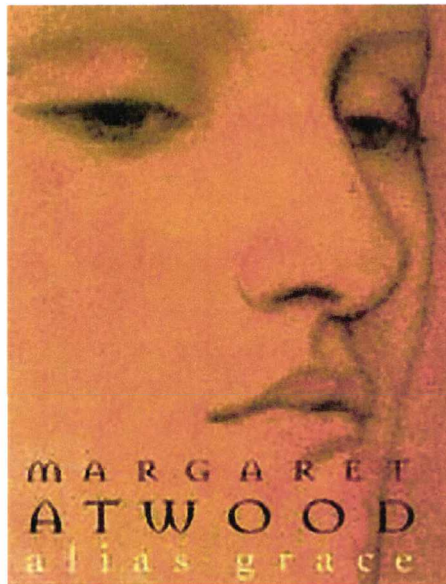


Figure 3

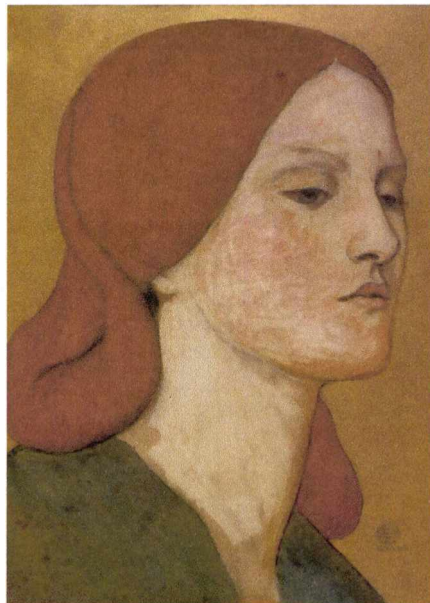


Figure 4

Figure 3: Cover illustration of the 1997 Virago edition of *Alias Grace*

Figure 4: 'Head of a Girl in a Green Dress' (Elizabeth Siddal) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1850-65)

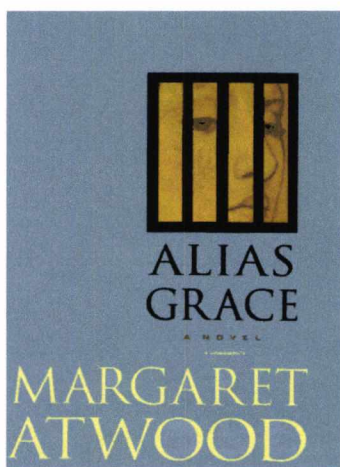


Figure 5

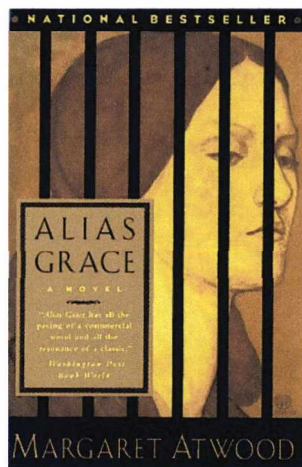


Figure 6

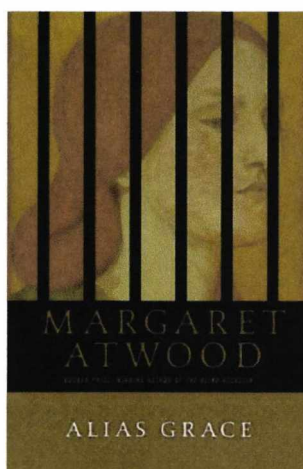


Figure 7

Figure 5: Cover illustration of the 1996 Bantam Dell edition of *Alias Grace*

Figure 6: Cover illustration of the 1997 Doubleday (US) edition of *Alias Grace*

Figure 7: Cover illustration of the 1997 Doubleday edition of *Alias Grace*

The Meta-Narrative of the Epigraphs

As mentioned earlier, the metaphor of the patchwork quilt finds echoes in the actual structure of the novel; this is reinforced by the fact that each chapter is opened by a selection of two to three epigraphs, made up of quotes from historical records, newspaper reports, and pieces of poetry, which make the novel appear like a sort of narrative patchwork in itself. Each fragment, because of its particular genre and origin, is representative of a specific voice and speaks from a particular perspective, which helps create a mosaic picture of nineteenth-century Canadian society. As will be shown, England and America play an important part in this mosaic, thus illustrating the cultural bonds linking Canada to these two nations. Moreover, the epigraphs fall into different categories, but usually start with an extract from an authentic nineteenth-century document dealing with the murders: among these, Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* is quoted several times, along with various extracts from the Toronto newspapers the *Toronto Mirror* and the *Star and Transcript*. These sources offer conflicting, and at times contradictory, information as to what really happened on the day of the murders. This clearly illustrates that there is not one version of history, but several, each being influenced by its narrator's personal vision and perspective.

The second epigraph is usually an indication of nineteenth-century social manners and conventions, with a choice of quotes from such sources as the *Punishment Book* of the Kingston Penitentiary, a letter from the Medical Superintendent at the Toronto Lunatic Asylum, or, yet again, the already mentioned *Beeton's Book of Household Management*, and its section on 'hysterics'. These help give a portrait of the period in which the novel is set, while revealing some aspects of nineteenth-century social intolerance and popular prejudices. The last epigraph is typically a quotation from the work of a canonical nineteenth-century poet or novelist, such as Emily Dickinson, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Edgar Allan Poe, Coventry Patmore or Nathaniel Hawthorne. While these extracts constitute a good sample of the nineteenth-century literary canon, one will notice the overwhelming presence of British and American authors, thus emphasising the cultural bonds tying nineteenth-century Canada to its European imperial centre, and to its North American neighbour. The intention behind this last selection of quotations seems to be to highlight the cultural and artistic colonisation suffered by Canada in the nineteenth century. These quotations also bring a finishing touch to the narrative patchwork woven by the author, and form the last fragments to be added to the tapestry. Magali Cornier Michael has pointed out how, through this juxtaposition of different kinds of texts, Atwood's novel highlights 'documents' as 'nothing more than texts that have been culturally privileged but are, like all

texts, inevitably mediated in ways that produce rather than simply represent material events and persons'.⁶⁶ By highlighting the 'similarities between texts that traditionally have been differentiated from each other in terms of a gradation of "truth value"', Michael sees the novel as destabilising the authority of these official documents.⁶⁷

The epigraphs, together with the painting chosen for the novel's cover, play an essential role in the elaboration of the intricate picture of Grace's life, and of the social and cultural context within which Atwood chooses to inscribe that life. Although the epigraphs and the painting remain in the margins of the main body of the text, and constitute small tangents from the novel's central story, their effect is not to be underestimated. The epigraphs, in particular, are strategically selected and grouped in pertinent ways so as to convey specific ideas. Through the minute observation of the various fragments, and the appreciation of the ways in which they are sewn together, a powerful message can be heard. The epigraphs thus seem to constitute a meta-narrative of protest and contestation, emerging from the margins of the novel and successfully writing back to its centre.

The cluster of epigraphs preceding Chapter Nine, for instance, articulates a harsh criticism of male artistic hegemony in the nineteenth century. The first quotation is taken from the 'Confession of Grace Marks' as it was reported in the *Star and Transcript* in November 1843. In this extract, Grace relates the build-up to the murder of Nancy Montgomery, with insistence on James McDermott's determination to kill Nancy and Grace's entreaties for him not to do so (p. 331). The second epigraph comes from James McDermott's own confession to his lawyer Kenneth MacKenzie, as it was retold by Susanna Moodie in her *Life in the Clearings*. In this third-hand account, McDermott describes in very graphic and gory details the murder of Nancy with the help of Grace: the scene is set in the cellar, where Nancy is found semi-conscious and bleeding profusely after having been hit on the head by McDermott's axe. McDermott explains how he proceeded to 'finish [his] terrible work' by strangling Nancy with Grace's handkerchief, him and Grace holding one end of the handkerchief each, while noting that Nancy's 'eyes literally started from her head' (p. 332). McDermott then confessed to cutting the 'body in four pieces' (p. 332). The obvious contradictions in the two versions of the murder could stem from the fact that McDermott's confession is ten years older than Grace's and a third-hand account, while Grace's was reported by a newspaper journalist whose goal was financial profit, at the expense perhaps of

⁶⁶ Magali Cornier Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 426.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

accuracy: it is thus very possible that the contents of each confession have been tampered with. Of course, the dissimilarities once again highlight the unreliability of the narrative act, and the way in which it is forever affected by its narrator.

But the third epigraph reveals the author's purpose in her selection of quotations: indeed, after the horrific description of Nancy's death, Atwood ironically chooses to place the famous line from Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition', where the nineteenth-century poet declares that 'the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world' (p. 332). The obvious problems of gender representation and objectification caused by such a claim are highlighted and powerfully denounced by Atwood's witty juxtaposition of the actual description of the death of a 'beautiful woman'. What poetry could Nancy's gruesome death inspire?, the author seems to be asking. Moreover, where does such a claim leave the female poet that is Atwood? The idea that women fit art as beautiful, but silent, dead bodies, imposes a formidable restriction on the creative expression of female artists. It also virtually silences their creativity on account of their gender, and in a novel written by a woman, and narrated by another, Poe's claim is shown to be based on unacceptably sexist prejudices. The tension between gender and creativity also reminds one of Elizabeth Siddal's tragic fate: an artist herself, she was torn between her own creative expression and the demands of her artist husband who saw her as the muse of his inspiration. As mentioned earlier, although Siddal painted the 'Lady of Shalott' before Rossetti did, it is his version of the painting, where Siddal figures as a beautiful, dead woman, that achieved recognition by being selected to illustrate Tennyson's collection of poems (see Figure 8: Siddal's 'Lady of Shalott', and Figure 9: Rossetti's 'Lady of Shalott'). It thus becomes clear that the novel's inter-weaving of various extracts from different sources allows the author to return to the past in order to re-arrange the set of mis-conceived values frequently encountered then into new, and modern visions. One of her aims for doing so is to denounce the objectification of women in the name of art, as well as the subordination of Canada to the cultural hegemony of England and America, a recurrent topic in Atwood's work.

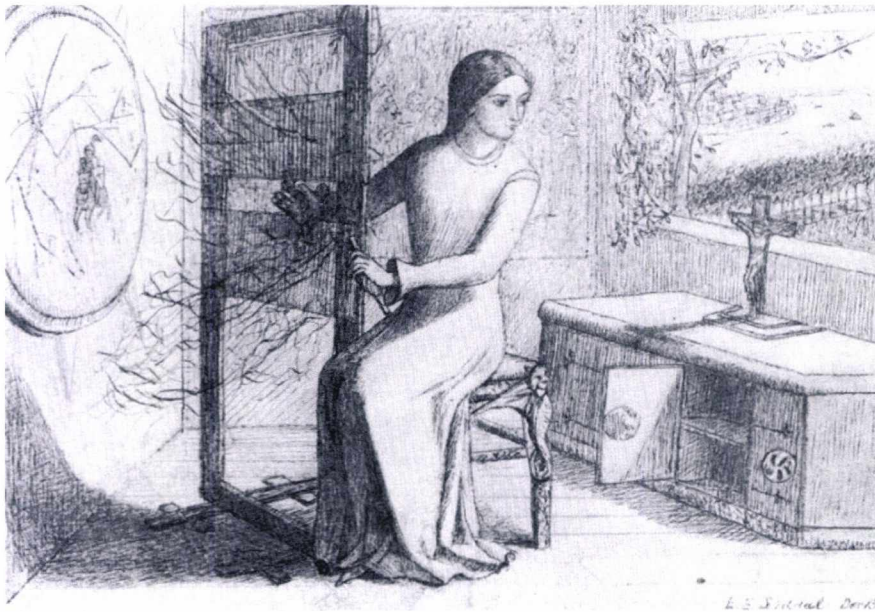


Figure 8

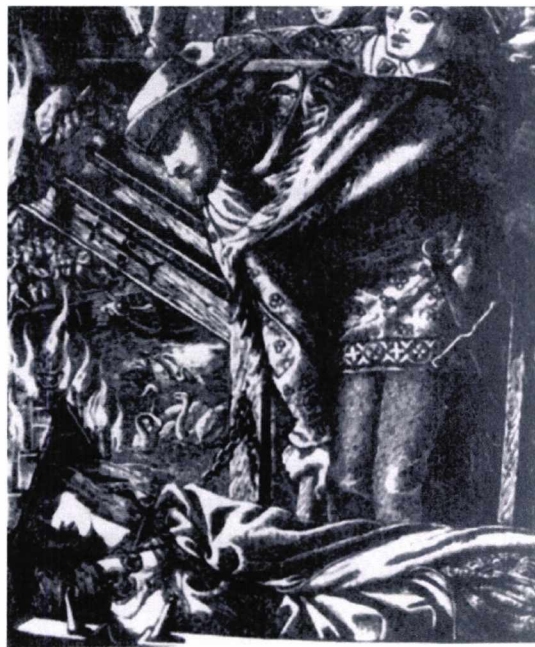


Figure 9

Figure 8: 'The Lady of Shalott' by Elizabeth Siddal (1853)

Figure 9: 'The Lady of Shalott' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1857)

***Grace*, Atwood's Unpublished Play**

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the story of Grace Marks, as Susanna Moodie told it in *Life in the Clearings*, has inspired Atwood on several occasions, one of them seeing the creation of *Grace*, a play which has never been published nor performed. It seems relevant to examine both narratives of the same story so as to highlight the ways in which Atwood's perspective of the events evolved over the years. *Grace* starts with Susanna Moodie being shown round the 'new' Kingston Penitentiary and asking to see Grace Marks: we are to understand that the murders took place eight or nine years previously. After this, the play goes back in time to the day of the murders, at Captain Kinnaird's – and not Thomas Kinnear's – farmhouse. The household members are carrying out their daily activities as usual for what seems to be the beginning of a normal day. The stage set allows the audience to see what the various characters are doing simultaneously in various parts of the house: Grace Marks, the housemaid, is busying herself in the kitchen while James McDermott, the farmhand, is working in the cellar.

In contrast to this, Captain Kinnaird is in the front parlour and Hannah – not Nancy – Montgomery, the housekeeper, is upstairs in one of the bedrooms, getting ready. In the novel, domestic space and the way it is divided up among the various members of the household according to their particular social status, constitute a central theme. The servants, for instance, are described as keeping to their 'quarters', namely the kitchen, the cellar, the outside buildings and the attic where they usually had their rooms; their allocated space is thus mostly the back of the house or other peripheral region (cellar, attic and out-buildings). The masters on the other hand freely enjoy the front rooms of the house and have their bedchambers located at the forefront, or centre of the house. It is thus not a coincidence that the play should open with Hannah on the top floor of the house, literally but also symbolically above her other fellow servants, presently working hard in their 'part' of the domestic space.

In fact, Hannah's social position in the play constitutes the trigger for the tragedy about to unfold. She is indeed openly promiscuous with Captain Kinnaird who treats her as his mistress; however, Grace is also attracted to her master and resents the special treatment he gives Hannah. Her jealousy seems to be played out on two different levels: on one hand she admires Captain Kinnaird and wants to replace Hannah in his affection, while on the other hand, she resents a socially and morally 'unfair' situation, by which Hannah, a servant, acts 'above' her position by becoming involved with the master and gets to give orders to her fellow servants. A combination of these two motives prompts Grace to overtly dare McDermott to kill Hannah, in exchange for her promise to run away with him afterwards. In

contrast to the novel, in which Grace is portrayed as a young and innocent prey to the advances of both Thomas Kinnear and James McDermott, which she clearly rejects, she is a fully sexual being in the play and manipulates others in order to act out her urges.

Grace's complicity, if not responsibility, in Hannah's murder is also very explicitly shown from the beginning in the play, whereas the question of her role in the murder of Nancy remains a crucial question in the novel, one that is subjected to a lot of speculation without really being given any answers. Most of the novel's suspense revolves indeed around the pivotal enigma of Grace's culpability; but not so in the play where there is clearly no doubt about her involvement in the death of Hannah: after many taunts and blandishments, Grace manages to convince McDermott to kill the housekeeper, whom he hits with an axe. Hannah does not die though, but only loses consciousness, and the audience is shown Grace and McDermott ending her agony by strangling her with Grace's handkerchief. Once again, the gruesome detail of the handkerchief used to strangle Hannah is clearly linked to Grace in the play, whereas it remains a matter of much conjecture in the novel.

Shortly after Hannah is killed, the now bloodthirsty McDermott shoots and kills Captain Kinnaird, in spite of Grace's pleadings to spare him. McDermott then ransacks the house, looking for valuable objects, and sexually assaults Grace, this being the culminating point to the play's rush of violence. In the novel, however, Grace just about avoids McDermott's sexual attack by urging him to run away to the States. They do make an attempted escape before being caught, whereas in the play, it only takes a loud knock heard at the door for both accomplices to understand that they are under arrest. The play then ends with the character of Susanna Moodie, who is visiting the 'new' lunatic Asylum in Toronto and asks to see Grace Marks, who is now kept in the violent ward. Grace is said to be mostly quiet, but she starts talking when the visitors arrive: in a broken monologue, she declares that she cannot truly repent as part of herself is still glad that she helped kill Hannah. This complete admission of guilt terrifies Mrs. Moodie who is then shown out of the Asylum, and the play ends on the image of Grace very much like she is depicted in Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*: the heroine is haunted by guilt, and obsessed with tragic memories which, in Moodie's opinion, are the causes of her insanity. Atwood's later novel, however, presents a very different ending: Grace promptly returns to regular detention after a brief stay in the Asylum, and remains incarcerated for several more years before being granted a pardon and liberated.

One may wonder at these many differences between Atwood's two versions of the same story. In fact, through the process of writing her novel, Atwood admits that she 'did

what neither Susanna Moodie nor [she] had done before: [she] went back to the past'.⁶⁸ She then found that the 'past' was in fact made of 'records, documents, newspaper stories, eyewitness reports, gossip and rumour and opinion and contradiction'.⁶⁹ Atwood increasingly came to discover that there was no more reason to trust something written down then than there is now. After all, the 'writers-down' were human beings, and were subject to error, intentional or not, to their own biases and to 'the very human desire to magnify a scandal'.⁷⁰ Atwood also remembered that Susanna Moodie explained that she was writing Grace's story from memory, and, as it turned out, 'her memory was no better than most'.⁷¹ Atwood thus became aware that Susanna Moodie's version was incomplete, and could not be trusted as a faithful account of the facts. She gives an example of this in the ending chosen by Moodie for her narrative: her sequence of events is not in keeping with the actual historical facts. Atwood realised indeed that although Moodie 'obviously felt Grace was doomed to remain in the Asylum until her death',⁷² she found out that, shortly after the publication of *Life in the Clearings*, 'Grace Marks was sent back to the Penitentiary, with a letter from the superintendent that described her as a kind and helpful inmate, who was certainly too sane to stay at the Asylum any longer'.⁷³ Acknowledging the fact that Moodie's account was ultimately an unreliable narrative, Atwood approached her original version of Grace Marks's story from a completely different angle, and significantly altered the narrative she would use for her 1996 novel. Moreover, the fact that several accounts of the same story can exist even within a single author's body of work seems to illustrate the claim that there really cannot be a single narrative, or history, when it comes to the past.

Conclusion

Atwood seems to be calling for a re-reading of the past so as to try and better understand its characters' actions. Although it is true that much of our understanding of the past is informed by what has been written and understood since, it seems nevertheless that Atwood's novel attempts to see the world of nineteenth-century Canada as it would have been viewed by those who actually experienced it. Moreover, while it could be said that in *Grace*, Atwood's play, the author looks at the characters' actions through a modern lens, especially with the ironic

⁶⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1513.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1513.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1514.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1514.

⁷² Margaret Atwood, 'Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For', *Op. Cit.*

time-travel sequence set in the present, in *Alias Grace*, however, Atwood seems to be using a ‘bi-focal’ lens: she manages to magnify all the minute details of Grace Marks’s everyday life while, at the same time, she complicates these with her own contemporary understanding of issues of social, gender and racial inequalities.

Finally, the author’s choice to focus on the particular experiences of historically marginalized characters, as with controversial female figures such as murderesses and madwomen, enables her to uncover a new aspect of the era she writes about. By moving away from traditional historical narratives and giving voice to a nineteenth-century female prison convict and Asylum inmate, Atwood is able to create a specifically female historical space in which traditionally oppressed female figures are given an opportunity to make themselves heard. The next chapter will attempt to see whether Anne Hébert’s novel *Kamouraska* can also be seen to re-define women’s historical space, and to re-interpret their roles in the past, by moving away from traditional hegemonic historical narratives.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Chapter Four:

Re-Interpreting Quebec's Past in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*

In her 1970 work *Kamouraska*, Anne Hébert attempts to re-examine certain aspects of Quebec's past so as to reveal the colonial and patriarchal oppression imposed upon Quebec's people, and more particularly upon women and the indigenous population, in the nineteenth century. Hébert uses historical fiction as a means to understand the social discriminations against these groups, and the consequences these have had up until the 'modern' time of the 1960s, when the novel was being written. In lieu of Canada's past, the novel proposes a vision entirely concerned with the fate of a single woman, the Quebecois heroine, and grounded in a single location, her natal Quebec. By thus placing her focus on a place and people which have traditionally been considered a minority in Canadian national narratives, and kept at the periphery of mainstream historical discourses, Hébert emphasises her wish to move away from centralised versions of her country's past. This attempt seems to be reinforced by the fact that the novel's protagonist is not a model of nineteenth-century femininity, but a woman accused of having murdered her husband. This choice of a rather contentious female figure powerfully enables the denunciation of the injustices endured by women in the nineteenth century, and allows the author to re-claim a place in the past for the numerous female voices history has marginalized and silenced. Finally, it is important to underline the ways in which Hébert's portrait of nineteenth-century Quebec contains a certain measure of self-introspection and self-reproach, by which the author seems to recognise and denounce some of Quebec's own discriminating attitudes.

Kamouraska is based on the tragic murder of Achille Taché, squire of Kamouraska, who was assassinated on January 31, 1839. His wife, Joséphine d'Estimauville, was suspected of having plotted the murder with her American-born lover, Dr. George Holmes, but was never officially proved guilty.¹ Incidentally, she was also an ancestor of Anne Hébert on her mother's side, and the author explained that the story of *Kamouraska* was inspired from a *fait-divers* which had happened in her family, and which she was told by her mother as

¹ For the details of this *fait divers*, see Sylvio Leblond, 'Le Drame de Kamouraska d'après les documents de l'époque', *Cahiers des Dix* (Vol. 37, 1972), pp. 239-73.

a child. Interestingly, Hébert admitted that the story her mother told her was what she described as the ‘family’s version’ of the incident: Joséphine had not had an adulterous affair with the doctor, and had not killed her husband.² The doctor’s culpability on the other hand was never doubted, so that the only remaining mystery of the *fait divers* seemed to reside in Joséphine’s actual involvement in the murder. The documents of the time only state that she was acquitted after spending two months in prison. Hébert, however, chooses to incriminate her heroine in the novel, and to make her guilty of the crime: Elisabeth d’Aulnières does have an adulterous affair with Dr. George Nelson, and does drive him to kill Antoine Tassy, her husband. In a short introductory note to the novel, the author makes clear that her characters have only borrowed the most ‘official’ and external gestures of the original protagonists of the drama, and that they have ‘gradually developed within [her] mind’ to become ‘imagined creatures all [her] own.’³ Similarly, although Hébert used authentic archive documents to build her narrative, she specified that the story was ‘still very much a work of fiction’.⁴

In Hébert’s version of the story, Elisabeth d’Aulnières is the young Quebecois heiress of a well-to-do bourgeois family who marries the wealthy Antoine Tassy, squire of Kamouraska, at the age of sixteen. This union is clearly dictated by a need for social ascension, and not by love, and is consequently doomed to failure in the novel. Antoine reveals himself a cruel and abusive husband to his young bride, and imposes upon her his violent behaviour, his drunken orgies, and his adulterous escapades. Elisabeth is visibly the victim of the (patriarchal) laws of the time which refused women access to divorce, and which offered them very little protection against domestic violence. The heroine soon returns to live in her home town with her family, and finds support and sympathy in another male character, Dr. George Nelson, who rapidly becomes her lover. They both eventually agree that killing Antoine is the only way Elisabeth can be free, and after a failed attempt at poisoning him, George sets off to the seigneurie of Kamouraska, armed with a gun. On January 31, 1839 Antoine Tassy is killed by a shot to the head; almost immediately Elisabeth and George are suspected of the crime. George runs away to the United States, abandoning Elisabeth to her fate; he eventually avoids extradition, and never faces trial. Elisabeth attempts to follow him via the same route but is arrested by the local authorities and put in jail to await the impending murder trial. In the novel, she uses her bourgeois social background and family connections to influence the outcome of the trial, and she is eventually cleared of all charges and freed.

² See ‘Anne Hébert, 1916-2000’, film documentary directed by Jacques Godbout (2000).

³ Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska*, introductory note to the novel (PaperJacks, Don Mills, Ontario, 1974). All further references to the text in English will be from Norman Shapiro’s translation, in this edition.

After leaving prison, Elisabeth metaphorically enters another jail: that of a loveless second marriage to Jérôme Rolland, a respectable local notary, so as to regain some of the social dignity she has lost. The narrative actually starts eighteen years later, as the heroine is keeping watch by the bedside of dying Jérôme. Faced with his approaching death and the prospect of being widowed for the second time, Elisabeth is prompted to reflect upon the events of her youth, and in particular upon the circumstances of the tragic death of her first husband.

Centre Versus Margin, Official Versus Personal: Elisabeth's History

A significant aspect of the novel is its unusual narrative structure, which helps emphasise the subjectivity and personal vision inherent in Elisabeth's story. Although the novel is based upon the heroine's own account of the events of her past, this access to first-hand information is complicated by the novel's revelation of the gaps and biases in Elisabeth's version, and therefore does not give the reader a reliable description of the facts. Elisabeth's series of reminiscences, dream-sequences and anachronistic memories creates a fragmentation in the flow of her narrative and a constant shifting from one period of her life to another, from one location to another, and from one method of remembering to another. This narrative technique illustrates the author's attempt to move away from mainstream historical narratives, and to create a change in the form of historical records, from written and official documents to oral and personalised versions. In the novel, the historical narrative is not even made oral but remains within the mind of the heroine to whose thoughts the reader is given access. The novel thus challenges the traditional authority of the written historical form by replacing it with the heroine's otherwise unrecorded – and unspoken – account. Two important aspects of Elisabeth's 'history' will be focused on in this section: her heavy reliance on the realm of the personal, which she posits as a valid analytical tool for explaining the events of her past, and her assertion of the importance of the local, small-scale knowledge of places and customs in the making of her 'history'.

Elisabeth's use of a personal and subjective form is perhaps best illustrated by the recurrence of her distorted chronology, where later events affect her reading of earlier ones. This is translated in the text by the juxtaposition of various episodes from various periods of her past, without any interruption, introduction, or indication in the narrative that she is

⁴ *Ibid.*

moving from one incident to another. For instance, as Dr. Nelson takes her to a local ball, she notices:

Le sleigh américain monté sur de hauts patins est rapide comme le vent. Et pour ce qui est du cheval noir, pas un aubergiste (tout le long de la rive sud, de Sorel à Kamouraska) qui ne s'émerveillera de son endurance et de son extraordinaire beauté.

Nous évitons de nous regarder. Tous deux dans une même bonne chaleur. Sous les robes de fourrure. Très droits. L'air indifférents. Sans aucune émotion visible.⁵

[Perched high on its open-frame runners, that American sleigh can fly like the wind. And that black horse... There's not an innkeeper all along the southern bank, from Sorel to Kamouraska, who'll fail to marvel at his great endurance and his matchless beauty.

We try not to look at each other. Both of us sharing the same tender warmth. Wrapped in our furs. Sitting up straight. So unconcerned. No sign of emotion on our faces. (p. 134)]

The knowledge of George's later furious trip to Kamouraska to kill Antoine affects Elisabeth's memory of an event previous even to her and George starting their adulterous affair. The first paragraph of this extract refers to George's sleigh and horse, which will play a crucial role in identifying him as a key suspect to the murder, through the testimonies of the innkeepers mentioned. This is a later event to the time of the narration, which is returned to in the following paragraph: Elisabeth is back in the sleigh with George, being accompanied by him to a local ball, and thus potentially compromising herself and her reputation, as she is still a married woman. The awkwardness and rigidity described between George and Elisabeth is read in terms of their future liaison, and of the murder they will plot later on: in Elisabeth's memory of the ride to the ball, she and George behave as if they were already guilty of both crimes. It seems the outcome of their union affects the very nature of that union. Another instance of the narrative's distorted chronology occurs when it is agreed that Elisabeth's maid, Aurélie Caron, will go to Kamouraska to poison and kill Antoine:

Rue du Parloir, on s'agite auprès du lit de mon mari. Mais, moi, Elisabeth d'Aulnières, [...] j'entends distinctement la voix d'Aurélie Caron, dans un autre monde qui...

- Vos amours me font mourir, Madame...

Une voix très chère donne la réplique à Aurélie.

⁵ Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1997), p. 133. All further references to the original text will be from this edition.

- Il n'y a plus qu'à attendre que la neige tombe et que les glaces prennent. Dès que les chemins d'hiver seront en état, tu partiras pour Kamouraska.

- Moi, Aurélie Caron, fille mineure du bourg de Sorel... Le lendemain matin, Monsieur le docteur Nelson m'a fait venir à son bureau. Il m'a donné vingt piastres pour le voyage, plus neuf piastres pour m'acheter des hardes. (p. 178)

[Rue du Parloir. Someone is stirring beside my husband's bed. But I, Elisabeth d'Aulnières, [...] I only hear the sharp, clear voice of Aurélie Caron, off in another world. A world where...

"This love affair of yours will be the death of me, Madame! How long..."

A voice I adore replies.

"We only have to wait for the snow and the ice. As soon as the roads get hard enough, you'll leave for Kamouraska..."

"I'm Aurélie Caron, from the town of Sorel... That's who I am. Still a minor... The next morning, Doctor Nelson called me into his office. He gave me twenty dollars for the trip, and nine more to buy myself a bunch of clothes." (p. 179)]

In this passage, Elisabeth's story moves between three different time periods and locations without any interruption in the flow of her narrative. She starts off by the bedside of her dying husband, in their house on Rue du Parloir, in Quebec City, from where she travels back in her mind to the day when George gave Aurélie instructions on how to go about Antoine's poisoning. The scene is set in Sorel, in Elisabeth's family home. Then, Aurélie's reply to George's orders is the incriminating testimony she will give the authorities much later, during the inquest into Antoine's murder. Antoine did not die from poisoning though, but from a gunshot wound to the head: simultaneously to Elisabeth remembering Aurélie getting ready for her trip to Kamouraska, she blends in the knowledge of Aurélie's failure to poison Antoine. The traditional chronology of events is thus not respected but challenged in Elisabeth's narrative: this seems to highlight the fact that in any historical writing process, the knowledge of the outcome affects in an irrevocable manner the historian's understanding of the circumstances surrounding that outcome, as well as of the chain of events that led up to it. Elisabeth therefore questions conventional historical linearity by imposing her own multi-dimensional perspective on the events of her past.

Another interesting aspect of the narrative is Elisabeth's speculative attitude regarding events she did not witness directly, such as George's trip to Kamouraska to kill Antoine. As Elisabeth was not present at this event, she has to resort to her imagination to try and conjure it up. This, and the non-linearity of her narrative, emphasise the dream-like texture and

incorporeality of her story. However, it also raises questions as to the validity of her 'first-hand' account. In the case of her memory of George's trip to Kamouraska, she literally thinks herself into one of the inns where he stops on the way:

Moi, Elisabeth d'Aulnières, non pas témoin, mais voyante et complice. Déjà admise dans l'auberge [...] Non pas reçue et accueillie comme une voyageuse normale à qui l'on offre une chambre et un lit. [...] Mais placée, immobile et silencieuse, au centre de la maison. Afin que je voie tout et que j'entende tout. (p. 207)

[Me, Elisabeth d'Aulnières. Not here as a witness, but to watch and play a part. [...] Not like just another traveler, taken in and given a bed and room. [...] But set down, still and silent, right in the middle of the house. To see and hear what happens. (p. 208)]

The heroine proposes to act as a spy and to carefully observe the action as it unfolds, so as to be able to report it faithfully to the reader. But the fact remains that she is imagining, or even possibly inventing, the details of this scene which she did not directly witness. Despite Elisabeth's insistence on her presence in the inn and involvement in the action, this speculative aspect of her narrative clearly raises questions as to her reliability as a narrator, and seems to indicate possible inaccuracies in her story. The novel also shows another gap in Elisabeth's story by revealing the personal bias influencing her vision. This is made visible by an inconsistency in her description of George's character: throughout the narrative, Dr. Nelson is depicted as being madly in love with her, and dedicated to freeing her from her abusive husband, even if it means killing him. Surprisingly, however, after the murder has taken place and after George has had to flee to the United States, chased by the authorities, Elisabeth mentions the testimony of a young medicine student:

- Depuis quatre mois, j'étudie la médecine avec le docteur Nelson. Le 6 février, dans la nuit, il est venu me réveiller [...] Il m'a raconté qu'il était obligé de quitter la province pour ne jamais revenir. [...] Il s'est mis à pleurer, dans une grande agitation de tous ses membres, de tout son corps. Je n'ai jamais vu, de ma vie, un homme dans un tel désespoir. Il a ajouté: "*It is that damned woman that has ruined me.*" (p. 244)

["Four months ago I began to study medicine with Doctor Nelson. On the sixth of February, late at night, he came to my room and woke me up. [...] He told me he had to leave the province for good, that he could never come back. [...] And he began to cry, and his body began to tremble and shake all over. In all my life I never saw a man in such a state. Then he said, in English: 'It's that damned woman. She's ruined me...'" (p. 247)]

This surprising testimony comes at the very end of the novel, and from a character who, in spite of his involvement with Dr. Nelson during the four months preceding the murder, and therefore during the affair between Elisabeth and George, has not been mentioned once in the entire narrative. This extract thus seems to highlight the gaps and personal (mis)interpretations in Elisabeth's story. Also, the fact that George chooses to warn the student, in spite of being hunted by the police, and of having very little time left before he has to leave, not even time to say goodbye to Elisabeth, seems to reinforce the importance, and therefore the veracity, of the student's testimony. Moreover, George's untranslated exclamation, where he blames Elisabeth for the tragedy, somehow goes against her claims that he loved her, and was willing to do anything for her. The presence of the English language in the text, George's native tongue, is weighed up against Elisabeth's own version of their story, in French: somehow, the single comment carries with it more truth than Elisabeth's entire narrative. Consequently, the reader becomes suspicious that her story might not be as accurate as it first appeared, and that her vision of the events could be biased.

Kamouraska thus features a historical narrative heavily reliant upon Elisabeth's personal vision, memory, and imagination, as well as built along her own ordering of the facts. As a result, *Kamouraska* becomes an untypical historical novel, in the sense that, as with Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, its primary aim is not to give a historical account of the period concerned, but rather to faithfully describe the tribulations of its central female protagonist, from her own perspective. Elisabeth's private life is indeed placed at the forefront of the story, and described with abundance of details, while there are very few references in the text to actual historical events or famous historical names: these seem to be drowned in the flow of Elisabeth's personal story. The novel thus apparently ignores the political and the historical in its narrative, but it will be shown that such elements are in fact present in the form of an underlying sub-text which occasionally emerges all the more powerfully at the surface of the main story.

Regarding the novel's scarcity of references to actual historical events, Emile J. Talbot has pointed out in his article 'The Signifying Absence: Reading *Kamouraska* Politically', that Anne Hébert's work seems primarily concerned with personal mythology, rather than with political ideology.⁶ Talbot agrees, however, that Anne Hébert usually brings forward a sharp critique of traditional Quebecois society in her work, and has contributed to the social changes

⁶ Emile J. Talbot, 'The Signifying Absence: Reading *Kamouraska* Politically', *Canadian Literature* (n° 130, 1991), pp. 194-95.

that Quebec has experienced since the 1960s. But he notices an obvious 'absence' in the narrative of *Kamouraska*: although the story is set in 1830s Quebec, no mention is made of the 1837-38 Rebellions, which represent the only armed revolt against British rule in Quebecois history and constitute 'one of the most significant chapters of French-Canadian nationalism'.⁷ Talbot adds that these events are still prominent in the Quebecois collective memory today, and that the remembrance of the Rebellions 'seems to be particularly acute during periods of heightened nationalism, such as in the late 1960s, when *Kamouraska* was being written'.⁸ As with *Alias Grace* then, one of the most noteworthy events in nineteenth-century Canadian history has apparently been left out. Talbot argues the case for the importance of such an absence, noting that in all types of discourses, omissions and exclusions which are the results of authorial choices can be powerful signifiers and convey crucial meaning.⁹

A careful re-reading of the text shows indeed a few passing references to the Rebellions, as when Elisabeth exclaims: 'Elisabeth d'Aulnières, widow Tassy. Remember Saint Denis and Saint Eustache!' (pp. 39-40). Talbot explains that Saint-Denis and Saint-Eustache are Quebec locations where two of the major battles of the Rebellions opposing the Quebecois *Patriotes* to the British rule took place. Talbot observes, however, that Elisabeth is clearly not reminding herself of these events for patriotic reasons, as she adds: 'Let the Queen have every patriot hanged if that's her pleasure. But not my love. Let him live, him alone. And let me belong to him forever' (p. 40). Elisabeth therefore does not seem to display the fervent patriotism one could expect of her. Talbot explains that this evocation of Saint-Denis and Saint-Eustache serves to stress the fact that, for the heroine, private passion has primacy over national solidarity.¹⁰ I would argue that this is also a way for the narrative to express an unusual, and by no means mainstream, attitude to the historical events of the time. It could be expected of a novel written during Quebec's Quiet Revolution that its heroine showed an allegiance to the cause of independence and freedom, as symbolised by the Rebellions. Elisabeth's apparent disregard for the fate of her people, and her assertion of private feelings before national sentiment or political engagement, are not in line with the traditional historical narratives of the period, as written in 1960s-70s Quebec. As a result, through the heroine's affirmation of the importance of the private and the personal over the official domain of political action, it seems Hébert attempts to inscribe her novel in a unique framework, distinct

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

from those that were conventional at the time. As with the character of Mary Whitney in *Alias Grace*, whose view of the 1837-38 Rebellions provided an interesting and untypical perspective on the events of the time, Elisabeth voices an isolated and dissident opinion which is not represented in Quebec's hegemonic historical narratives.

Furthermore, even though the Rebellions represent the only armed revolt against British rule, they nonetheless failed to achieve Quebec's independence, and have therefore also been perceived as a 'negative' symbol for the Quebecois, and as a reminder of their failure. Mary Jean Green explains that for many Quebecois intellectuals of the 1960s, the reason why Quebec had failed to assert itself politically was linked to the failure of the 1837-38 Rebellions. Indeed, as a result of the defeat of the *Patriotes*, Quebec developed its paradigm of *survivance*, where submission to the dominant authority, and idealisation of the large rural family through the *revanche des berceaux* (revenge of the cradles), were central.¹¹ In this context, Elisabeth's attitude towards the Rebellions can be interpreted very differently: her dismissal of their importance can be seen as a way of detaching herself from the disabling sentiment of failure they created among her countrymen. Moreover, the Rebellions' outcome, namely the *survivance*, with its incentive for women to have large families, can be identified as a tool of patriarchal oppression for women, and therefore not something the heroine, who has eleven children in the novel, might want to celebrate. Green admits that this 'maternal ideal [...] was definitely rejected by Quebec women in the era of the Quiet Revolution.'¹² Green concludes that Hébert portrays the historical event in a way that inscribes it within the reality of her own time, that is, the Quiet Revolution, through the articulation of the 'integration of women's "personal" and "political" concerns that has become not only a slogan but a hallmark of the contemporary feminist consciousness.'¹³ Elisabeth is therefore fighting against the restrictions placed upon her sex by nineteenth-century Quebec society, but also, it seems, against Quebec's self-imposed limitations, in the context of its painful colonial past.

Besides, it is interesting to note that the novel's allusion to the historical and political events of the time uses a coded manner and hidden signification. Talbot points out, for instance, the reference to the town of Burlington, about which Elisabeth says: 'Burlington. Burlington. I seem to hear that name, ringing in my ears, shrill as a bell' (p. 4). Burlington is of course the town in Vermont to which Dr. Nelson fled after the murder, but Talbot observes

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹¹ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

that it is also a town to which a number of *Patriotes* fled, and where an important *Patriotes* press was located.¹⁴ Similarly, regarding Dr. Nelson's name, Talbot reveals that although there were a number of Anglo-American names Hébert could have used, the author explained in an interview that 'Nelson' was the name of a protagonist of the 1837 Rebellion.¹⁵ Talbot concludes Hébert probably refers to brothers Robert and Wolfred Nelson, two of the most prominent leaders of the revolt. Talbot adds that Robert Nelson was one of the most radical of the rebels, and also a physician, therefore also known as 'le Dr. Nelson', like his namesake in the novel. Talbot adds that Robert Nelson is remembered for having signed a declaration creating the Republic of Canada in 1838, but had eventually to flee to the United States when things fell apart.¹⁶ Dr. George Nelson's similar attitude emphasises, once again, the rapprochement in the novel between fiction and history. The similarities between both characters seem too great for it to be a simple coincidence: they seem to have been meant by Anne Hébert, who might have wished that George Nelson, her character, be read in the light of Robert Nelson, his historical namesake. Both distinguished themselves by rebellious and controversial actions which are consequently amalgamated in the reader's mind. George's attempt to free the Quebecois heroine from the patriarchal oppression of her abusive husband could thus be seen in terms of Robert Nelson trying to free Quebec from the domination of the British rule. The influence of the political and the historical is thus definitely present in the novel, and forms a system of underlying coded references which nevertheless filters through the narrative of the main story.

Another important aspect of the novel is its reliance on actual historical documents and archival records. In particular, the authentic archive documents of Elisabeth's murder trial are directly quoted in the text, in their original English. Mary Jean Green has pointed out that these citations seem to penetrate and fracture the body of the French text, the same way their words have fragmented and shattered the life of the female protagonist.¹⁷ Green adds that although these historical records have been almost exclusively authored by men – judge, prosecutor and witnesses – and, in the context of nineteenth-century Quebec, by the British colonisers, Anne Hébert uses them as 'a site in which to seek the buried traces' of her protagonist's life.¹⁸ Green notices indeed that the effort to recover and take possession of

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴ Emile J. Talbot, 'The Signifying Absence: Reading *Kamouraska* Politically', *Op. Cit.*, p. 197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197, quoting from 'Anne Hébert: Entrevue', *Québec français* (n° 32, 1978), p. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁷ Mary Jean Green, 'Dismantling the Colonizing Text: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *The French Review* (Vol. 66, n° 6, 1993), p. 960.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 959-60.

their own history has been a major focus of women writers of postcolonial cultures, and in the case of Quebecois writers, the reconstruction of their past has been a central preoccupation in response to a conquering British presence, and to Lord Durham's Report of 1839, in which he described them as 'a people with no history and no literature'.¹⁹ According to Green, through its references to the archive documents of Elisabeth's trial, Hébert's text clearly links the discourse of the English conquerors to the accusation directed at her female protagonist.²⁰

Green also points out that, lying behind Elisabeth's trial, evoked but never clearly identified in Hébert's text, is another trial of a woman accused of murdering her husband. Shortly after the British conquest of Quebec, Marie-Josephte Corriveau, now known as *la Corriveau*, a figure who has become notorious in Quebecois oral tradition, was convicted and sentenced to be hanged in an iron cage.²¹ Green believes that *Kamouraska*'s constant images of bars and imprisonment, Elisabeth's fear of hanging, and her sense of being enclosed in a cage, all also point to the story of *la Corriveau*. The novel's numerous references to the heroine's trial also recall *la Corriveau*'s trial, which was held under British martial law, and like Elisabeth's, in English, 'a language neither [*la Corriveau*] nor the witnesses understood.'²² Green concludes that *la Corriveau*'s trial was clearly not exemplary 'by any modern standards', and that by linking Elisabeth to the figure of *la Corriveau*, Hébert shows her as the incarnation of a double oppression, or 'double colonisation'. Indeed, although 'it is a foreign conqueror that hanged her as a murderess, it is the patriarchal discourse of her own society that condemned her as a witch.'²³ Popular beliefs claim indeed that *la Corriveau* used to practice witchcraft, and that she killed as many as seven husbands. Quebec's role in the persecution of some of its own (female) citizens is a crucial issue which will be addressed in the next section of this chapter. Green adds that in the 1960s, *la Corriveau* was rehabilitated not only as a feminist figure, but also as an incarnation of the 'nationalist plight' of Quebec. She enumerates a number of artistic works dedicated to her, but fails to mention Anne Hébert's own contribution to the movement: her 1990 play *La Cage* is also a variation on the story of *la Corriveau*, and will be explored in depth in Chapter Five. Surprisingly, *Kamouraska* already contained a reference to Hébert's yet unwritten play, in its mention of the character 'John Crebessa', who is briefly alluded to on only two occasions: he is the British judge who symbolises Elisabeth's paranoid fear of being discovered and condemned

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 960.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 960.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 960.

²² Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

for her controversial actions. Judge John Crebessa plays a more prominent role in *La Cage*, however, where he is one of the main characters, and the chief agent of persecution of Ludivine Corriveau, the heroine, as will be seen later. Suffice only to say that this passing reference in *Kamouraska* seems to confirm Green's argument that, in the novel, Elisabeth's story is influenced by, and read in the light of, Quebec's traditional folkloric figure of *la Corriveau*.

In addition, the English language quotations from Elisabeth's murder trial seem, as with *la Corriveau*'s trial, to become a sub-text to Elisabeth's story, and to form the backdrop against which she is able to make her dissident voice heard. As Elisabeth herself notices, she is 'being charged in a foreign tongue' (p. 39), as 'the indictment [is] writ in the Queen's own English, by the masters of this land' (p. 27). The heroine clearly emphasises the opposition between the centre-based colonising discourse, in English, and her own suppressed account, in French, which is kept at the margins of the ruling version. The use of untranslated English, in a novel otherwise written in French, is therefore a compelling denunciation of the hegemonic historical narrative which does not take into account the cultural and linguistic diversities of its protagonists. Queen Victoria in particular, the nineteenth-century figurehead of the all-powerful British colonial empire, is made to play a part in Elisabeth's condemnation. The heroine remembers indeed the charges brought against her at the murder trial:

Voici le greffier qui termine l'acte d'accusation.

With intent in so doing feloniously, wilfully and of her malice aforethought to poison, kill and murder the said Antoine Tassy, against the peace of our said Lady the Queen, her crown and dignity. (p. 44)

[Listen to the clerk, reading the last words of the indictment.

With intent in so doing feloniously, wilfully, and of her malice aforethought to poison, kill, and murder the said Antoine Tassy, against the peace of our said Lady the Queen, her crown, and dignity. (p. 39)]

The accusation is explicitly made in the name of the Queen, the foreign ruler of the Quebec province, and Elisabeth's suspected involvement in the murder seems to be made worse by the fact that the crime is done 'against the peace of our said Lady the Queen'. Elisabeth is accused of having broken the strict colonial laws of the British Empire, a fact which, surprisingly, makes her appear to be the malevolent alter ego of Queen Victoria: her 'malice' and wilful felony are opposed to the Queen's peace and dignity, while her actions seem to be judged in terms of an usurpation of power. Elisabeth has indeed appropriated the right to 'kill

and murder', a right which, it seems, only the 'crown' should enjoy. It appears that Queen Victoria, the figurehead of the State, somehow becomes Queen Victoria the 'woman' in the text, in order to be challenged by Elisabeth. The ambiguous relationship between the heroine and the British sovereign will be explored in more depth in the next section. Elisabeth rebels, however, against her accusers:

The Queen! Toujours the Queen! [...] Qu'est-ce que cela peut bien lui faire à Victoria-au-delà-des-mers qu'on commette l'adultère et le meurtre sur les quelques arpents de neige cédés à l'Angleterre par la France? (p. 44)

[The Queen! Always the Queen! [...] As if it makes the slightest difference to our dear Victoria-beyond-the-sea! What does she care if there's a little adultery, a little murder, way out there on a few acres of snowy waste that England once took away from France? (p. 39)]

The repetition of the expression 'the Queen' in the French version emphasises the generic aspect of the foreign monarch for Elisabeth, and her attempt to undermine the power of the British sovereign. The Queen is reduced to a simple name, a label, whose centralised power, removed from the concerns of what goes on 'beyond-the-sea', at the margins of her political empire, is unsuitable and unacceptable for the people of Quebec. Elisabeth rebels against an oppressive rule dictated by a sovereign who has never been in the province, and challenges Queen Victoria by asserting her right to adultery and murder – her way, it seems, of demanding freedom for herself and for her fellow Quebecois. Elisabeth's ironic description of French Canada as 'a few acres of snowy waste that England once took away from France' echoes the terms used by French philosopher Voltaire to describe *Nouvelle France*, and therefore powerfully enables her attempt at subversion. Linda Hutcheon has explained the use of irony as 'a doubled or split discourse which has the potential to subvert from within', and how, as a 'double-talking, forked-tongued mode of address, irony becomes a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time'.²⁴ According to Hutcheon, and as mentioned earlier, irony can thus be a powerfully subversive tool for postcolonial artists attempting to re-think, and re-address their national history. Elisabeth's ironic comments thus become efficient means to challenge dominant discourses, such as France's and England's dismissive attitudes towards the colony, by working from within such discourses and undermining them from within.

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Op. Cit., p. 73.

Indeed, not only these ‘few acres of snowy waste’ are at the forefront of Hébert’s story, but more particularly, the author’s assertion of the importance of small-scale and local knowledge of places, people and customs in the construction of her historical fiction is illustrated by the way in which she treats specific Quebecois locations in her story. These locations play a crucial role in the novel, and are almost given the fictional dimension of characters. For instance, Hébert’s choice to name her work ‘Kamouraska’ can be seen as an expression of her will to focus on, and give importance to, the local instead of the universal, the peripheral instead of the central. The action of the novel is indeed mostly set in the town of Sorel, where most of the events of Elisabeth’s past took place. Kamouraska is only the little seigneurie in which she spent a couple of unhappy years as a young bride to Antoine Tassy, squire of Kamouraska. It is also the tantalising destination of her lover’s murderous journey to kill Antoine; but the location is geographically isolated, and does not enjoy the recognition of bigger or better-known Quebecois cities. The small seigneurie is, however, given a poetical dimension through the heroine’s musing upon the sounding of its name: ‘the green-tart, jagged sounds of “Kamouraska” will jangle against one another. That old Algonquin name. Rushes-beside-the-water...’ (p. 204). It seems Elisabeth writes the small location into the imaginative map of Quebec, and as a result, gives it legitimacy and recognition. The acknowledgement of Kamouraska’s Native ancestry, and the reference to a culture that had rapidly become alienated and marginalized by the hegemony of the European colonisers, also emphasise the author’s intention to recognise and claim the importance of the culturally peripheral.

Hébert’s legitimising of Quebecois locations is also made obvious in the repetitive litany of village names on George’s trip from Sorel to Kamouraska. Elisabeth mentally enumerates, one after the other, the multitude of tiny hamlets in a careful repetition, ‘[I]like someone saying a rosary, bead by bead’ (p. 194). Such (little-known) names as Saint-François-du-Lac, Pierreville, Nicolet, Lobinière, or Sainte-Croix, to name but a few, seem to punctuate the narrative, and to give physical reality to George’s murderous journey. By giving them value and importance in the text, these villages help define and illustrate Quebec’s cultural landscape. Arnold E. Davidson points out how the sense of geographical distance in the novel is translated into a sense of historical time: the ‘particularly Canadian perspective of awesome distance’ is indeed present in the text through George’s two hundred mile journey down the St. Lawrence River to murder Antoine, and through his two hundred

mile 'blood-soaked' journey back.²⁵ Davidson notices how those distances stretch out the symbolic geography of the novel's plot, in which the American lover, 'a refugee from the American Revolution', kills the French-Canadian husband at his country home, the Algonquin name of which 'bears testimony to the previous presence of the Indians', who were 'replaced by the French', who were 'defeated by the English', who were 'revolted against by the Americans'. This, in Davidson's view, transforms distance into time, and gives a 'still greater perspective on the central episode in the novel'.²⁶

Other Quebecois locations of importance in the text are the 'Rue Augusta', in Sorel, where Elisabeth's childhood home used to be, and where she met and had her affair with George Nelson, and the 'Rue du Parloir', in Quebec City, where she resides with Jérôme Rolland, her husband, and the place from which she is remembering the events of her past. The emphasis on these two different locations, through Elisabeth's repetitive allusions to them, helps express the division in Elisabeth's self, as she is pulled between her past life and her present one, her scandalous youth and her more respectable mature age. These locales become important signifiers of meaning in the narrative: Rue Augusta symbolises the forbidden place which tempts Elisabeth at the same time as it corrupts her hard-won social dignity, whereas Rue du Parloir encapsulates the respectability but also the oppressive nature of her marriage with Jérôme. Each specific street name, which might appear a mundane detail to the outside reader, plays a central role in the story, and therefore gives worth and legitimacy to the actual location it refers to.

This, according to Linda Hutcheon, constitutes one of the key aspects of both post-modern and postcolonial writings: a strong shared concern with the notion of marginalisation, or with the state of what can be called 'ex-centricity'. In granting value to (what the centre calls) the margin or the Other, the post-modern and the postcolonial challenge any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as they recognise that they cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre.²⁷ Anne Hébert's, but also Margaret Atwood's attempts at re-writing the local stories of, respectively, Joséphine d'Estimauville and Grace Marks, can thus be seen as inscribed within the larger framework of contesting the dominant Eurocentric interpretation of Canadian history and culture. The regionalism of their writings, and their focus on the local are also potent ways of challenging any claims of

²⁵ Arnold E. Davidson, 'Canadian Gothic and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Vol. 27, n° 2, 1981), p. 248.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 72.

universality: as Simon During has noticed, post-modernism, but also post-colonialism, can be characterised as ‘that thought which refuses to turn the Other into the Same’.²⁸

The Life of the Bourgeoisie in Nineteenth-Century Quebec

The novel offers a vivid portrait of nineteenth-century Quebecois society, and powerfully denounces the ways in which it persecuted and oppressed its female members. In particular, Elisabeth’s status as a member of the local bourgeoisie plays a central role in revealing and condemning the limitations and frustrations imposed upon her by this status. Her controversial actions, namely her adultery and complicity to murder, provide a convenient means of denouncing the bourgeoisie’s fake values and repressive need for conformism: by breaking the rules her milieu imposed upon her, the heroine highlights the oppressive nature of these rules, and is almost justified in rebelling against them. The novel shows clearly how Elisabeth’s upper-class family, composed of her widowed mother and her three elderly maiden aunts, forms a constricting matriarchy denying her any choice or right to self-determination. In order to escape this oppressive matriarchy, Elisabeth runs into the grip of an abusive husband, and then, of an authoritarian lover, both tokens of the totalitarian patriarchy controlling women at the time. It seems one form of domination follows another in Elisabeth’s world, and tragic measures, such as murder, become necessary in order to break free and gain independence.

The most visible form of oppression imposed upon women in nineteenth-century Quebec seems to be marriage, which for Elisabeth’s relatives represents a means of social class ascension. Elisabeth is therefore encouraged by her matriarchal family to agree to an early marriage to Antoine Tassy, squire of Kamouraska, because he is an ‘[e]xcellent match. Fine old family. Two hundred and fifty acres of land and woods. And the islands opposite the estate. And a salt marsh. A bakehouse. A wharf. A fine stone manor built out on the cape’ (p. 64). The enumeration of Antoine’s goods, and the trivial nature of some of the possessions (such as the ‘bakehouse’), help emphasise the mercantile terms in which Elisabeth’s union to Antoine is decided. Although very wealthy, and the well-born heir to an aristocratic Quebecois family, Antoine nevertheless turns out to be a heavy-drinking, violent, and possibly mad, husband to his young bride. His vision of matrimony quite literally illustrates the figurative entrapment it imposed upon women in the nineteenth century:

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72, quoting from Simon During, ‘Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today’, *Textual Practice* (Vol. 1, n° 1, 1987), p. 33.

Derrière [Antoine] se balance une grosse corde, avec un nœud coulant, attachée à une des poutres. [...]

- Tu viens, Elisabeth? J'agrandis le nœud coulant et tu viens avec moi. Te balancer au bout de la corde. Deux époux pendus ensemble, dans un même nœud de corde. [...] Les liens du mariage, c'est ça. Une grosse corde bien attachée pour s'étouffer ensemble. (p. 86)

[Behind [Antoine], tied to one of the beams, a thick rope, ending in a noose, swings back and forth. [...]

"Are you coming, Elisabeth? I'll make the noose bigger and you can come too. Swinging from a rope. Husband and wife, hanging together, two heads in one noose. [...] The bonds of marriage. A thick rope, nice and solid. A noose to strangle in together. (pp. 84-85)]

Antoine's description of marriage as a 'thick rope', and his entreaty that Elisabeth accept his invitation to 'strangle in' with him, emphasise the power of husband over wife, and the wife's duty to comply with all her husband's wishes, as destructive as those might be. In the context of the social laws of the time, there is very little the heroine can do, as access to divorce was not granted to women until the late 1960s in Quebec. Anne Hébert was therefore writing her novel at a time when Quebecois women were demanding, and gaining, more freedom, and her description of an abusive marriage from which no escape can be had would have thus directly fed into their demands. Mary Jean Green points out that the heroine's resort to homicide would have found echoes in the highly publicised contemporary legal cases involving wife abuse and murder.²⁹ As Arnold E. Davidson has observed, the novel definitely suggests a certain element of self-defence in the decision that Antoine must die.³⁰ The novel therefore voices a strong condemnation of the restrictions, and, at times, ill-treatment, that marriage has meant for women up until the relatively recent time of the 1960s in Quebec.

After being freed from her cruel union to Antoine, Elisabeth will enter matrimony again, and contract another (unhappy) marriage to Jérôme Rolland, a respectable local notary. The text emphasises how, if she has avoided going to jail for Antoine's murder, she is nevertheless '[c]ondemn[ed] [...] [f]or the rest of her days' to be imprisoned in a loveless second marriage (p. 235). Her decision is prompted by a desire to comply with the values dictated by her bourgeois milieu, and an attempt to regain some of the social dignity she lost through her stay in prison. However, her choice to marry another man she does not love is

²⁹ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 91.

³⁰ Arnold E. Davidson, 'Canadian Gothic and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 252.

problematic in light of her previous rebelliousness, and is even more so as she reveals her awareness of the hypocritical scheme she is involved in:

Se remarier, sans voile ni couronne d'oranger. Jérôme Rolland, mon second mari, l'honneur est rétabli. L'honneur, quel idéal à avoir devant soi, lorsqu'on a perdu l'amour. L'honneur. [...] La carotte du petit âne. (p. 9)

[Get married again. No veil this time, no orange blossoms. Jérôme Rolland, my second husband, and honor is restored. Honor. What an ideal to set yourself when love is what you've lost. Honor. [...] The donkey and his carrot. (p. 3)]

The comparison of her pursuit of respectability to that of the donkey's endless attempts at catching his carrot undercuts the belittling effects of having to comply with socially imposed models of female behaviour. One of the bourgeois values Elisabeth conforms to states that her honour, as an individual, depends upon her getting another husband, a respectable man who, in spite of the murder she has been tried for, agrees to marry her: 'who would dream of marrying this woman now, after the tragedy at Kamouraska? Dear little Jérôme Rolland, you're raising your hand. [...] Just offer her a spotless name, above reproach' (p. 221). In the context of nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology, it seems Elisabeth cannot perform her social redemption as a single or widowed woman, she needs the 'spotless name' of a man in order to do so.

Questions are raised, however, as to why Elisabeth agrees to demean herself in this travesty of social dignity. Mary Jean Green accurately points out that, on this occasion, it is the heroine herself who has chosen imprisonment over freedom. She adds that Hébert, in an interview, stressed the centrality of this decision: 'For Elisabeth, total freedom would have meant the freedom to leave. In this era, it was very difficult: she did not have the strength to do it'.³¹ Green concludes that Elisabeth becomes the agent of her own imprisonment, the perpetrator of her own murder. She adds that in this complex psychological study of the mechanisms of oppression, Hébert's analysis presents striking similarities to a current of thought that was very much in the air in the Quebec of the 1960s: the theory of 'decolonisation'. Green explains that many Quebecois intellectuals saw links between their situation, and that of other former French colonies, struggling for independence, and also in the process of analysing the effects that colonisation had had on their populations. Albert Memmi in particular recognised that the most destructive aspect of colonisation was the attempt to convince the colonised people of their inherent inferiority, in order to justify the

privileges usurped by the colonisers. Memmi adds that the most pernicious element in this process is that the colonised man ends up accepting as true the degrading picture of himself he is constantly confronted with.³² This seems to describe particularly well Quebec's reaction after the defeated Rebellions of 1837-38, and the pessimistic attitude which appears to have subsequently impeded its movement towards freedom. In this context, a parallel seems to be drawn between Quebec's attitude and Elisabeth's acceptance of the patriarchal rules of society, in what can be seen as the novel's treatment of the conflict between one's rebellious desires for freedom and one's basic need for daily survival.

Her second marriage becomes another very constricting and suffocating union, where her imposed duties as wife and mother are clearly described in the text:

Épouse parfaite de Jérôme Rolland, un petit homme doux qui réclame son dû presque tous les soirs, avant de s'endormir [...] Mon devoir conjugal sans manquer. Règles ou pas. Enceinte ou pas. Nourrice ou pas. [...] Je n'ai été qu'un ventre fidèle, une matrice à faire des enfants. Huit enfants de celui-ci. Et les trois petits d'avant celui-ci (p. 10)

[Model wife of Jérôme Rolland. Mild little man who insists on his rights before he'll go to sleep. Every night [...] And me, always the dutiful wife. Period or not. Pregnant or not. Nursing or not. [...] I was nothing but a faithful belly, a womb for making babies in. Eight children by him. And three with the one before. (p. 4)]

Significantly, Elisabeth is here reduced to an object, 'a faithful belly', valued only for the reproductive and sexual functions it can offer. As mentioned earlier, the maternal ideal of the *survivance*, which encouraged women to have large families, is clearly not celebrated by the heroine who has visibly endured her numerous pregnancies. She mentions them in this extract only as so many proofs that she has been a 'model wife' to the husband she did not choose. Moreover, expressions such as husband's 'rights', and 'devoir conjugal', emphasise the legal terms in which sexual intercourse between man and wife were understood at the time. Menstruation, pregnancy and breast-feeding, the important and varied stages of a woman's life, are obliterated in the text, and balanced out by Jérôme's single, almost obsessive, desire. His insistence on the sexual act becomes in fact almost grotesque in its automatism and lack of emotion. Consequently, through her vivid description of nineteenth-

³¹ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 97, quoting from 'L'Écriture et l'ambivalence, entrevue avec Anne Hébert', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 7, n° 3, 1982), p. 444.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 97, quoting from Albert Memmi, 'Les Canadiens français sont-ils des colonisés?', *L'Homme dominé* (Gallimard, Paris, 1968), pp. 87-95.

century Quebecois society, Hébert accurately reveals the set of complex circumstances at the origin of Elisabeth's actions, and helps demonstrate the type of social pressure the heroine is victim of.

In fact, the insistence in the story on the appalling conditions of Elisabeth's married life with Antoine seems to explain, if not justify, the horrible murder she will plan, and to shift the blame for the crime to the rigid social structures which seem to have fostered it. Gabrielle Pascal-Smith has indeed noticed that the novel presents a vision of 'la condition féminine' which embodies the bourgeois milieu and its mechanisms of power. It describes the roles assigned to women by this milieu, and the impossibility for women to obtain other roles. Significantly, Pascal-Smith also concludes that death becomes the only possible accomplice to women's revolt in the narrative.³³ Moreover, the novel's closing image of a woman entombed alive, and dug up after several years, to be found still alive, vividly summarises the author's condemnation of women's state of patriarchal (and colonial) oppression:

Dans un champ aride, sous les pierres, on a déterré une femme noire, vivante, datant d'une époque reculée et sauvage. Étrangement conservée. On l'a lâchée dans la petite ville. Puis on s'est barricadé, chacun chez soi. Tant la peur qu'on a de cette femme est grande et profonde. [...] Il ne lui reste sans doute plus qu'à mourir de faim et de solitude.

Malfaisante Elisabeth! Femme maudite! (p. 246)

[Off in a parched field, under the rocks, they've dug up a woman, all black but still alive, buried there long ago, some far-off, savage time. Strangely preserved. Then they've gone and let her loose on the town. And all the people have locked themselves in. So deathly afraid of this woman. [...] Nothing to do now but let herself die. Alone and hungry...

Wicked Elisabeth! Damnable woman! (pp. 249-50)]

Elisabeth symbolically becomes that woman, whose blackened body seems to represent the heroine's own agonising self in her role of 'model wife', with its pretence of innocence. The strict moral codes with which Elisabeth eventually complies nevertheless leave her in a state of figurative semi-death: she is starving for more freedom. The cruelty of the 'far-off, savage time' which has persecuted and entombed the nameless woman is echoed in the coercive social conventions which are slowly annihilating Elisabeth. Mary Jean Green points out that the role of Madame Rolland is a mask for Elisabeth, like that described by Frantz Fanon in

³³ Gabrielle Pascal-Smith, 'La Condition féminine dans *Kamouraska* d'Anne Hébert', *The French Review* (Vol. 54, n° 1, 1980), pp. 91-92.

Black Skin, White Masks: a mask which attempts to hide a metaphorical blackness. This mask of innocence protects, but it also suffocates and imprisons, and therefore, in its effects, reminds one, yet again, of the woman's blackened body in the extract above.³⁴

A significant aspect of the novel's description, and condemnation, of nineteenth-century Quebecois bourgeoisie is the insistence upon its anglomania, and mimicry of the imperial centre. Constant references in the text to English culture and its values help describe the ambiguous relationship between the Francophone upper-class and its English-speaking leaders. An early example of this occurs in the text during Elisabeth's and Antoine's wedding party. The heroine's streak of anglomania is revealed through her dislike of the location chosen by Antoine, a rural inn, and of the local fiddlers and dancers joining the couple in their celebration. Elisabeth strongly criticises the traditional Quebecois music and the guests' manners: 'All these ignorant, backwoods boors! Reeking of sweat and dirt. Doing their noisy dances, shrieking like so many beasts off to be slaughtered...' (p. 69). But interestingly, her disapproval is expressed in terms of the wedding party's failure to equal the 'distinction' of the governor's ball, where '[t]he young men are wearing white gloves and such pious expressions. And the governor... With his whiskers, reddish gold, like cat's fur. And his oh-so British air... I speak such elegant English. The governor told me so...' (p. 68). Elisabeth emphasises the 'Britishness' of the governor's appearance as a criterion of excellence, while congratulating herself on her achievement at reaching such criteria, through her command of the English language. The juxtaposition of both episodes, namely the Quebecois wedding celebration and the British colonial ball, brings about a comparison between Quebec and its Imperial centre, with Elisabeth highlighting the differences and many ways in which she sees Quebec failing to equal Britain. Her condemnation of the rural folks' lack of refinement, and the almost bestial terms she uses to describe them, are reminiscent of the English colonising discourse, and in particular of Lord Durham's Report of 1839, in which, once again, he described the French Canadians as 'a people with no history and no literature', and therefore needing to be rapidly assimilated by the dominant British culture. The heroine's problematic relationship with her fellow Quebecois countrymen seems to reveal that she has internalised the negative picture of Quebec presented by its English coloniser. Elisabeth therefore feels compelled to imitate the English ruling class, and to reject Quebec's own folkloric customs and traditions.

³⁴ Mary Jean Green, 'Dismantling the Colonizing Text: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 961, quoting from Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, London, 1986).

Elisabeth's position becomes even more problematic when it comes to her relationship to Queen Victoria. As mentioned earlier, Elisabeth's murder accusation is phrased in the form of an opposition to the Queen: '*against the peace of our said Lady the Queen*' (p. 39). The state of (anglophile) perfection Elisabeth strives to achieve seems to be obliterated by this single accusation: her fall from innocence to corruption is strangely, but specifically, read in terms of a failure to comply with the 'model' behaviour of the colonial ruler. Significantly, Elisabeth's attempt at regaining some social dignity also takes the form of a resemblance to the British monarch:

Les enfants habillés, coiffés, calmés ont des poses charmantes autour de leur mère. [...]

- On dirait la reine avec ses petits princes autour d'elle!

La vérité sort de la bouche des innocents. La reine contre Elisabeth d'Aulnières, quelle absurdité. Comment ose-t-on m'accuser d'avoir offensé la reine? Lorsqu'il est prouvé que je lui ressemble (pp. 33-34)

[The children – dressed, combed, calmed down – strike a delightful pose around their mother. [...]

"Just like the Queen with her little princes by her side!"

Out of the mouths of fools. How true. The Queen, against Elisabeth d'Aulnières? Absurd. Who would dare accuse me of offending the Queen? When it's obvious that I look just like her (p. 29)]

The suggested comparison to Queen Victoria becomes almost a replication when Elisabeth adds: 'I act like the Queen of England. I'm fascinated by the image of Victoria and her children. Perfect imitation' (p. 29). Elisabeth's confessed copying of the British sovereign seems to be her safe-guard against committing a *faux-pas* and becoming, once again, a social outcast. Mary Jean Green has pointed out that the figure of Queen Victoria in the novel serves to enforce a concept of womanhood – and female sexuality – that is shared by Elisabeth's own French-speaking culture.³⁵ The rule of the coloniser, with its pervasive enforcement of a proper female behaviour, thus becomes a powerfully effective means of oppressing its female subjects. However, as Green notices, the heroine's resemblance to Queen Victoria is shown to be only an illusion, a 'fausse représentation' which is 'démasquée' in the text.³⁶ It seems that for all her efforts at perfection, read here in terms of imitating the ruling centre, Elisabeth cannot help but fail, and appear the way she really is. When the pretence is exposed, the heroine suggests instead: 'Let's show [them] the backside

³⁵ Mary Jean Green, 'Dismantling the Colonizing Text: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 961.

of Victoria's image. [...] Here's your mother, unkempt and dishevelled' (p. 30). Through her failure to meet with the high standards of social decorum she associates with the coloniser, Elisabeth sees herself as the (negative) reverse of Queen Victoria. This highlights the dilemma the heroine is faced with: complying with the unattainable criteria of her anglophile upper-class, or losing all social dignity and becoming the opposite of the social model enforced. In other words, Elisabeth must strive to become what she cannot be, or be herself but be castigated for it. As Green recalls, Albert Memmi has pointed out this central feature of the colonising discourse, by which colonised people are accused of being essentially what they are.³⁷ Consequently, although Elisabeth is a passionate and independence-loving woman, she constantly attempts to deny those aspects of her nature in the novel.³⁸

Moreover, Emile J. Talbot links the heroine's anglomania to the scarcity of historical references in the text, arguing that the characters in the novel do not speak of 'one of the most momentous events in Québec history [the 1837-38 Rebellions] because they are impeded from doing so by their private passion', but also because 'their anglomania has made them incapable of political speech and political action.'³⁹ It seems on the contrary that the 'anglomania' described in the text has a political function in itself: it serves to emphasise, and denounce the colonial models imposed upon nineteenth-century Quebec. Elisabeth's anglomania is indeed shown to be the result of the rigid traditional education she received from her oppressive matriarchy of widowed mother and maiden aunts. Specifically, Elisabeth's relatives form a 'gynécée familial' (family gynaeceum) which is defined by, and condemned for, its anglomania. It is Elisabeth's aunts, for instance, who insist that she must learn English, and promise to 'take her to the governor's ball' (pp. 43-49). The concepts of 'proper female behaviour' which they live by are thus denounced as coercive tools associated with the expression of the British rule in Quebec, as seen above.

In place of a panoramic view of the historical events of the period, the novel offers a close, almost magnified, observation of nineteenth-century social customs in Quebec, and in particular within the bourgeoisie. In this context, dress code and fabric play a central role in revealing, once again, the upper-class's anglomania. Clothes also have a social meaning which plays a significant part in the narrative, in punctuating and illustrating certain key events of Elisabeth's life. Dress, in the text, is in turn a sign of upper-class affluence, a token of imitation of the imperial centre, or a sign of adulterous and murderous intentions.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 961, quoting from Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 960, quoting from Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé* (Payot, Paris, 1973).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 960.

Elisabeth's rearing as 'a rich young miss', for instance, is specifically understood in terms of the long enumeration of fabrics which have 'composed' her youth: 'the tulle of her First Communion dress gives way to silk and sheer batiste, to muslin, velvet, satin and furs, to fine cashmere' (p. 55). The fabric of her bourgeois background thus seems to be symbolised by the rich and varied materials mentioned. Moreover, the fact that '[t]he fashion books', and 'the bundles of cloth, [are] still fragrant with the smell of distant oceans crossed', seems to show that the textiles have been ordered from the other side of the ocean, possibly from Europe, and that Elisabeth's clothes are modelled according to the fashion of the colonial centre (p. 55). Elisabeth's position as a member of Quebec's wealthy and anglophile bourgeoisie is thus, once again, reinforced, while her clothes seem to indicate an attempt at mimicking the manners and lifestyle of the colonisers.

The narrative's focus on the heroine's clothes reveals an awareness of nineteenth-century dress codes, by which one's clothing is indicative not only of one's status, but also of one's intentions. This becomes obvious in Elisabeth's choice to wear a 'beautiful velvet, cherry-red' dress to the ball she is going to with George Nelson. The rich texture and vibrant colour seem to constitute a revelation of the inappropriate thoughts Elisabeth has for Dr. Nelson, while her clothing condemns her in the eyes of the local community before she and George have even started their affair. The dress is therefore instrumental in the narrative in compromising her reputation, and questioning her respectability as a married woman. Similarly, when the heroine and her lover attempt to convince Aurélie Caron, the handmaid, to go to Kamouraska to poison Antoine, the persuasion and transformation of Aurélie into a murderess is performed through the ritual of removing her (innocent) clothing, and dressing her in Elisabeth's garments: 'I begin unfastening Aurélie's shawl [...]. Take off her bodice, her skirt. [...] My Irish linen petticoat, my openwork stockings, my velvet gown. Here and there, a pin to pull in the sagging waist, tuck up the trailing skirt' (pp. 176-77). The narrative explicitly chooses to associate the murderous plot with evocations of clothes and fabrics: '[i]f only you put an end to Monsieur Tassy, you won't have to work again for the rest of your life, Aurélie. You'll live like a lady. [...] All dressed up in velvet, red or blue. Or in fancy silk' (p. 178). It is specifically the appeal of these 'wondrous words' which 'go coursing, pell-mell, all in a jumble' in Aurélie's head, that win her over to her mistress's project: she rejoices at the idea of 'red velvet', 'blue velvet', and 'fancy silk', and therefore agrees to carry out the murderous deed (p. 178). The narrative's understanding of nineteenth-century

³⁹ Emile J. Talbot, 'The Signifying Absence: Reading *Kamouraska* Politically', *Op. Cit.*, p. 199.

dressing codes thus becomes an essential tool in the illustration of the tensions and motivations behind the characters' actions.

Likewise, embroidery and needlework, typical domestic activities for nineteenth-century women, become means of ingeniously conveying the characters' states of mind. The traditional respectability associated with needlecraft is subverted in the text, so as to draw an analogy with murder, and express the heroine's controversial thoughts:

Sur fond jaune une rose rouge éclatante, inachevée! [...] S'éveillent la laine écarlate, les longues aiguillées, le patient dessin de la fleur de sang. Le projet rêvé et médité, à petits points, soir après soir, sous la lampe. Le meurtre imaginé et mis en marche à loisir. [...] Mon complice silencieux à mes côtés. [...] Il me tend les brins de laine à mesure. Nous suivons, tous deux, sur le canevas l'avance d'une fleur trop rouge. (pp. 42-43)

[The yellow background. The rose, bright red, left unfinished. [...] Suddenly, coming to life... The long needlefuls of scarlet thread, the patient outline of the flower. The blood-red flower. The plan... Conceiving it, working it out stitch by stitch, evenings on end, by the light of the lamp. Plotting the murder, setting the wheels in motion, gradually, all in our own good time... [...] Silent accomplice by my side. [...] He hands me the lengths of thread as I need them. Together we sit looking at the canvas, watching a flower take shape, a flower that's much too red. (pp. 37-38)]

The embroidery helps illustrate the slow progression of Elisabeth's and George's murderous intentions in this passage. The 'blood-red flower' symbolises the violent death Elisabeth knows is awaiting Antoine, but also the burning adulterous passion consuming her and her 'silent accomplice'. The painstaking efforts required by the needlework become a metaphor for the scheming, 'stitch by stitch', of a meticulous murder plot. Elisabeth's embroidery pattern, however, provokes a disapproving response from her aunts:

Mes petites tantes font de la tapisserie. Des fleurs ternes naissent sous leurs petits doigts secs, servilement copiées du cahier de *La Parfaite Brodeuse de Boston*.

- Adélaïde ma sœur, vous avez vu comme la Petite met du rouge sur son métier? Ne trouvez-vous pas cela choquant? Ne peut-elle pas s'en tenir au modèle? Des teintes douces et passées... (p. 43)

[My aunts, busy with their embroidery. Beneath their dry little fingers, dull, lifeless flowers take shape, slavishly copied from the pages of the *Boston Ladies' Needlework Magazine*.

"Look, Adélaïde. You see how much red the child is using on hers? Really, it's outrageous. Why can't she follow the model? Nice subdued colors..." (p. 38)]

The reference to the *Boston Ladies' Needlework Magazine*, and the fact that Elisabeth's maiden aunts 'slavishly' copy its embroidery motifs, seem to confirm their wish to conform to all things British, or of British origin. Significantly, the observation that Elisabeth cannot follow their (anglophile) model has ominous resonances in light of the tragedy about to unfold: Elisabeth will not follow the models of proper female behaviour enforced by her family, but will pursue her own (scandalous) pattern of adultery and murder. Elisabeth's 'outrageous' use of colour, therefore, shows a knowledge of traditional nineteenth-century needlework conventions, and a choice to challenge those in order to express her own creativity, if only in a coded manner. In contrast to the 'subdued' tones, and 'dull, lifeless flowers' which take shape beneath her aunts' 'dry little fingers', Elisabeth creates 'yellow', 'scarlet' or 'blood-red' motifs which 'suddenly, [come] to life', and rebel against her aunts' stern conformism (pp. 37-38). Ultimately, the needlework seems to symbolically represent her body, while its excess of 'rouge' could possibly allude to her sexual response to the presence of Dr. Nelson. As in *Alias Grace*, therefore, needlecraft is used to convey veiled messages, and possible avowals of guilt to the reader. In both novels, the feminine activity, safely confined to the domain of the home, expresses contentious ideas, and refers to scandalous events taking place outside the boundaries of legality.

The Native Servant, Haunting the Mind of the Coloniser

Interestingly, as in *Alias Grace*, the heroine of *Kamouraska* is paired with a secondary female character who becomes her controversial counterpart: Aurélie Caron, Elisabeth's faithful maid and confidant, plays this role in the novel. She is presented to the reader through Elisabeth's description of her, and significantly, the heroine mostly points out those features which underline Aurélie's physical difference, and suggest, possibly, Native blood. Elisabeth notices, for example, Aurélie's 'little Mongol face', her '[t]wo narrow slits for eyes', her 'big mouth', her 'face, her neck, her bare arms [that] all have the ashen pallor of mushrooms', her '[t]wo long woolly braids [which] flap against her back', her 'bare feet [...] caked with mud', and the 'little print dress' she usually wears (pp. 55-59). These characteristics help convey a sense of 'foreignness' and 'mystery' about Aurélie, and the fact that her ethnic background is never clearly identified emphasises the peculiar aura surrounding her. I would suggest that Aurélie symbolically embodies the 'non-European' in the text, and becomes the 'postcolonial Other' of the white Quebecois bourgeoisie as it is depicted in the novel. The relationship

between both groups is played out in different ways in the narrative, and each of these ways will be examined in this section.

To begin with, Aurélie's physical difference is also matched with an unusual lifestyle, which is underlined by Elisabeth as being marginal, and as challenging the norm of well-thinking Quebecois society. Aurélie lives with a man whom she calls her 'uncle', but who is in fact her lover and keeper, she practices 'magic tricks on newborn babies', by which she is able to tell whether they will live or die, she reads the future in cards and can predict the weather (p. 118). In the context of the austere nineteenth-century Quebecois society described in the novel, the handmaid is seen as an outcast, but she nevertheless comes to embody a sense of freedom and rebelliousness for daring to break all the rules of proper female behaviour enforced by that society. Elisabeth, who is the same age as Aurélie, but whose life is considerably more confined and restricted than hers, is fascinated by the servant and 'green with envy' at her social and sexual freedom. For the heroine, Aurélie represents the forbidden knowledge refused to her by her maiden aunts and mother: she feels that '[a]t fifteen [Aurélie] knows as much about life as the dead themselves', and longs to have access to her experience (p. 55).

Elisabeth's strict upper-class upbringing dictates that her early sexual awakenings have to be immediately channelled into socially acceptable ways. The novel points to the 'governor's ball' as being one such way, and has Elisabeth's bourgeois family declare: '[l]ucky for us, in this wilderness, that we have the governor's ball!' (p. 56). The ball provides an outlet in high society for young people's developing sexual desires, and an occasion for them to find a suitable match, and then seal their union in marriage. Significantly, however, the ball also comes across as the symbol of a social order which seems out of place and inadequate in the free wilderness of the New World. Its Europeanised, and more particularly anglophile, civilising purpose is contrasted to a more natural, original way of life, as embodied by Aurélie in the text, and is denounced as fake and destructive through the example of Elisabeth's tragic first marriage. The heroine, by now a mature woman, reflects bitterly upon the lies and disillusionment of her strict religious education, and accuses her bourgeois family of having hidden from her the reality of married life and motherhood:

Est-ce donc ainsi que les filles vivent? Je te bichonne, je te coiffe. Je t'envoie à la messe et au catéchisme. Je te cache la vie et la mort derrière de grands paravents [...] Ce sont les sauvages qui laissent tomber les nouveau-nés dans le lit des mères. [...] Les fables. [...]

Voyou. Beau seigneur. Sale voyou. (p. 68)

[Is this how little girls grow up? I preen you and primp you, fix your hair. I send you off to mass and catechism. I shield you from life and death, hide them behind big, high embroidered screens [...] We get babies from the Indians. They come by and drop them into women's beds. [...] Oh, the fables we tell. [...]]

Swine! Lord of the manor. Foul swine! (p. 65)]

Elisabeth's thorough religious up-bringing, aimed at making an accomplished and well-groomed lady of her, is condemned in this passage for 'omitting' to tell her the truth about 'life and death'. The heroine questions the merits of nineteenth-century education for women, which keeps them enclosed in a world of social propriety and decorum, where they are only encouraged to achieve high standards of physical perfection and piousness. Sexual education, on the other hand, is denied to them, and replaced by the perpetuation of superstitious 'fables'. Particularly, the myth that babies come from 'the Indians' seems to be indicative of the colonisers' prejudiced view, which implied that the socially taboo act of sexual reproduction should fittingly be attributed to the Natives and to their 'savage' ways. Elisabeth denounces the false 'fables' she was told as a child, and specifically makes them responsible for her marrying Antoine, the '[f]oul swine' who crushed all her dreams of romantic love. Had she been better prepared for matrimony, she seems to suggest, she might not have made the same choices. In contrast, the character of Aurélie Caron symbolises free-will and rebellion against the misguided social conventions of nineteenth-century Quebec. Her knowledge of midwifery, described as 'witchcraft' by the community, becomes worthy and valuable when compared to the ignorance and superstition of the upper-class. Aurélie therefore expresses a form of protest against the strict, but fake, moral values of nineteenth-century Quebecois bourgeoisie.⁴⁰

However, the dynamic between Elisabeth and Aurélie shifts after Elisabeth marries Antoine, and the heroine's original fascination will give way to a rejection and loathing of her handmaid. This is the second way in which Elisabeth's and Aurélie's relationship is played out in the novel. To a great extent, the reason behind Elisabeth's antipathy towards Aurélie lies in the fact that the servant becomes the object of her guilt. As mentioned before, Elisabeth and George coerce Aurélie into travelling to Kamouraska to have Antoine drink a deadly mixture prepared by George. Elisabeth thus forces her maid to carry out the criminal

⁴⁰ One is also reminded of the similar form of protest expressed by the central protagonist of Atwood's poem 'Half-Hanged Mary', in the context of seventeenth-century Puritan New England, where midwifery skills are also perceived as witchcraft.

act she herself refuses to perform, and subsequently has her take the blame for it. Carla Zecher explains that Aurélie is so different from her mistress in social standing that 'she seems an ideal scapegoat on which Elisabeth can lay her guilt, and then from which she can divorce herself'.⁴¹ As a result, the servant is arrested, but she reveals the truth about Elisabeth and her lover during the trial, and testifies against them. Her mistress never forgives her for this, and openly condemns Aurélie's refusal to lie for her: '[y]ou're not my friend anymore, Aurélie. I told you to lie when they put you in the box. Anything, so long as you didn't betray us' (p. 241). This clearly reveals the doubtful motives behind Elisabeth's rejection of Aurélie: she blames the handmaid for, quite rightly, accusing her of the murder of her husband. Aurélie's marginal social situation however, means that she faces retaliation from the local bourgeoisie, who, in turn, testify against her: 'Your Honor, this girl is a liar, a shameless slut. All the best families for miles around will come to [Elisabeth's] defense' (p. 242). The veracity of her testimony is subsequently questioned, and she ends up spending two and a half years in jail, '[h]eld at the court's discretion' (p. 57). Class inequalities and the heroine's dishonesty are thus clearly shown to be responsible for Aurélie's unfortunate fate and unfair treatment in the novel.

It seems that the heroine's rejection of her servant is complicated by a further element which has to do with the important, if ambiguous, role played by Aurélie's ethnic background. As mentioned earlier, Elisabeth's insistence upon Aurélie's physical features and foreignness emphasises the anti-conformism and freedom she associates with the latter. As things turn sour for the heroine, however, she projects upon her maid her own inappropriate thoughts and deeds, and, as pointed out by Carla Zecher above, she uses Aurélie as a convenient scapegoat upon whom she can lay her guilt. In her later descriptions of the servant, Elisabeth goes as far as suggesting that, paradoxically, Aurélie is responsible for 'tainting' and 'corrupting' the 'purity' of her and George's love. Aurélie's body features are prominent in this process of vilification, which seems to suggest that her physical 'Otherness' is held responsible for the ills befalling the heroine:

Sa figure trop blanche. [...] La petite tête crépue se balance avec des grâces d'actrice et de négresse. Tu ne peux savoir jusqu'à quel point, à cause d'Aurélie, le mépris et l'ignominie se colleront à notre histoire d'amour, en un masque durable et grimaçant. (p. 168)

⁴¹ Carla Zecher, 'Elisabeth-Sainte and Aurélie-Sorcière: The Mistress of Kamouraska and Her Double', *Québec Studies* (n° 20, 1995), p. 17.

[Her face, so white. [...] Tossing her kinky little head, like an actress. With a black girl's grace. You can't imagine how much shame and scorn will cling to this love of ours because of her. Fixed forever in a grimacing mask... (p. 169)]

One cannot help but feel slightly uncomfortable at the way in which Elisabeth draws upon Aurélie's (ethnic) physique in order to accuse her of bringing 'shame' and 'scorn' upon her illicit love affair. Her claim is clearly self-deluded, but it is also indicative of her prejudiced vision. The 'grimacing mask' of infamy which she associates with Aurélie reminds one yet again of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where the author described how the metaphorically black self of the colonised was forced to hide under the coloniser's 'white' mask of conformism.⁴² Aurélie's attempts at mimicry, as revealed by the references to 'acting' and to her affected manners in the passage above, will however fail, and her 'white mask' becomes a parodic grimace. In Elisabeth's eyes, it seems Aurélie cannot help but contaminate her mistress's and George's love with the stigma of her own (racial) difference. This conflict between ethnic 'Otherness' and social conformity also plays a central role when Aurélie is being persuaded to go to Kamouraska to kill Antoine. As said earlier, Elisabeth's clothes play a big part in convincing the servant to make the murderous journey, but beyond the appeal of possessing the garments, it seems a form of transformation takes place in the handmaid. According to Zecher, Aurélie, dressed in Elisabeth's clothes, 'become[s] the symbolic extension of her mistress'.⁴³ I would add that, crucially, Aurélie's innocent trying on of her mistress's clothes is implicitly turned into a scene of mimicry of the white upper-class:

Aurélie regarde sa propre image avec étonnement. [...] Puis bat des mains. S'agite. Se trémousse. [...] Revient au miroir. Déclare d'une voix haut perchée qui traîne:

- Adorable! Je suis adorable, comme une vraie dame... (p. 176)

[She looks at her own reflection in amazement. [...] Claps her hands. Begins to stir. To flutter. [...] Comes back to the mirror. Declares, in a shrill little drawl:

"I'm absolutely gorgeous! Just like a high-class lady!" (p. 177)]

Precisely because Aurélie is depicted as behaving and looking *like* a 'high-class lady', she expressly is not one, the same way, in Homi Bhabha's words, 'to be Anglicized is

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, *Op. Cit.*

⁴³ Carla Zecher, 'Elisabeth-Sainte and Aurélie-Sorcière: The Mistress of Kamouraska and Her Double', *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

emphatically not to be English'.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is significant to note that when Aurélie eventually sets off for Kamouraska, the scene surprisingly reminds one of Elisabeth's own honeymoon trip, earlier in the novel: 'Next morning, bright and early, Aurélie climbs up into the mail coach. Dressed in her new clothes, from tip to toe, like a bride going off on her wedding trip' (p. 184). Zecher notices how 'Aurélie is adorned as if for her wedding [...], a circumstance that clearly designates this voyage, with its disastrous results, as a reenactment of Elisabeth's own honeymoon journey (also disastrous)'.⁴⁵ It is striking, however, that the narrative should choose to draw an analogy between Aurélie's trip to kill Antoine, and her mistress's nuptial journey with him. The murderous trip seems to become the perverted and illegitimate reverse of the official, recognised event in this passage, and Aurélie, the Native servant, comes to be seen as the corrupted double of Elisabeth. In Zecher's opinion, the role of Aurélie in the novel is primarily that of Elisabeth's alter ego, and in 'denouncing her confidant Elisabeth is denouncing a part of herself'.⁴⁶ Zecher adds that 'each time the spectre of Aurélie resurfaces in her memory, Elisabeth must confront the demonic image of herself that she has repeatedly sought to efface'.⁴⁷

I would argue on the other hand, that if Aurélie is a 'spectre' in her mistress's memory, she is nevertheless a fully-fleshed individual in the novel. Admittedly, her portrait and actions are filtered through the heroine's own prejudiced vision of the events, but the reason behind Elisabeth's defamation of Aurélie seems to be more than just because the handmaid represents a repressed part of the heroine's psyche. Because of the heroine's particular insistence upon Aurélie's ethnic features, I would suggest that Elisabeth's condemnation of the handmaid has to do with the conflict between coloniser and colonised, as described in the novel. It seems Elisabeth rejects Aurélie because she sees in her the mimic (wo)man as defined by Homi Bhabha, the result of 'a flawed colonial mimesis'.⁴⁸ Significantly, this colonial mimesis is engineered by Elisabeth, and its purpose is to transform Aurélie into a murderess, thus encouraging her to break the boundaries of (colonial) law. Elisabeth both desires this transformation and dreads it, as can be seen in her emphasis on the sense of threat which she associates with Aurélie's mimicking 'mask'. Bhabha explains that the menace of mimicry resides in 'its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of

⁴⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, London, 1994), p. 87. Emphasis in the original text.

⁴⁵ Carla Zecher, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

⁴⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 87.

colonial discourse also disrupts its authority'.⁴⁹ The ambiguity, or 'double vision', of Elisabeth's attitude towards Aurélie is revealed by the fact that she forces her to dress up as a white member of the upper-class, coerces her into committing a criminal act, but then rejects her precisely for resembling too closely a bourgeois lady, and performing a crime which Elisabeth herself refuses to carry out. This ambivalent position challenges and undermines the authority of Elisabeth's narrative. Her unreliability as a narrator is demonstrated here again, and another aspect of her narrative bias is disclosed: in addition to the partiality she shows in the depiction of her relationship with George Nelson, as seen earlier, it becomes apparent that the heroine's portrayal of Aurélie is influenced by the bias of colonial discourse. Although the overwhelming impression of the novel is that of Aurélie's malevolence, which renders her an unsympathetic character, a careful reading of the text shows the heroine's responsibility in this through her unfair discrimination against Aurélie. Additionally, Bhabha notes that 'the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed'.⁵⁰ The conflicting tensions between what is 'permissible' and what 'must be kept concealed' accurately represent the dilemma of Elisabeth's narrative: she is divided between her awareness of the particular social and racial status she has to maintain in the midst of her Quebecois community, and her awareness of the reprehensible dealings and association she has carried out with the Native handmaid she now scorns.

These unresolved tensions explain why Elisabeth's memory, and by extension the novel itself, is haunted by the character of Aurélie. For that purpose, Elisabeth's description of the servant gives her a ghost-like, almost spectral consistency, which renders her all the more treacherous and malevolent in the narrative: '[y]ou never hear her coming in. Then suddenly there she is. As if she could walk through walls. Weightless and transparent' (p. 131). Zecher explains that in Elisabeth's story, Aurélie becomes a 'devil' and a 'witch', so that the heroine can keep for herself the roles of saint and victim. Zecher also adds that Aurélie becomes the voice of the heroine's conscience when the latter revisits her past, 'forcing her to include [...] details she would prefer to omit'.⁵¹ In the context of Aurélie's suggested Native ancestry, the fact that she seems to be haunting the mind of the heroine indicates another possible dimension to the narrative. Aurélie becomes Elisabeth's

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88. Emphasis in the original text.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89. Emphasis in the original text.

postcolonial ‘Other’, accurately reproaching her for the bad treatment she was given, while the heroine’s description of the servant is given in terms of the guilt she experiences. Early in the novel, a particular scene suggests that Elisabeth’s memory of Aurélie is overlapped by the memory of another, ancestral guilt. The incident is set when Elisabeth and Aurélie are fifteen, before Aurélie has become Elisabeth’s servant, and the heroine’s distorted, or non-linear, chronology helps emphasise the various simultaneous discourses in the text:

- Comme tu es pâle, Aurélie.
 - J’ai toujours eu un teint de prisonnière, Madame sait bien. Un vrai pressentiment...
 Rien ne va plus. Du premier coup le fond de l’histoire est atteint. Aurélie me parle de prison. Elle m’appelle “Madame”. Elle va vieillir sous mes yeux, s’alourdir. [...] *Me demander des comptes sans doute?* Mon âme pour que cela n’arrive pas une seconde fois! [...]
 Nous avons l’air de [...] chercher *des mots et des gestes déjà vécus* (p. 61, emphasis mine)

["My, but you look pale, Aurélie."
 "Oh, Madame knows... I always had this prison look. A taste of what was coming..."
 And that’s that. From the very first, we get right to the heart of the matter. She mentions prison. She calls me “Madame.” Now she’ll begin growing older before my eyes. [...] *Take me to task, perhaps?*... I’d give my soul if only I could keep all that from happening again! [...]
 It’s as if we’re [...] [g]roping for *words and gestures already used before* (p. 57, emphasis mine)]

An innocent memory is thus rapidly transformed into a painful one by Aurélie’s accusing and reproachful stance. The ‘heart of the matter’ is reached ‘from the very first’, and against Elisabeth’s will. Her non-linear ordering of the events of her past, which here makes her see her first encounter with Aurélie in light of later happenings between them, seems to suggest that an awareness of other historical events could also affect Elisabeth’s reading of the situation. The ambiguous reference, for instance, to ‘words and gestures already used before’, as well as Elisabeth’s indignation that Aurélie should want to ‘take [her] to task’, all seem to point to other deeds for which Elisabeth, the colonisers’ descendant, should have to answer for to Aurélie, the Native child. Elisabeth’s association of Aurélie with the guilt she experiences for sending her to jail, seems to echo, perhaps, the guilt disturbing the European colonial consciousness for the cruel and unfair treatment they inflicted upon the Native

⁵¹ Carla Zecher, ‘Elisabeth-Sainte and Aurélie-Sorcière: The Mistress of Kamouraska and Her Double’, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 13-14.

people. This impression seems to be reinforced by Aurélie's next remark, as the heroine protests and reminds her of 'the two long months [she] spent in prison': Aurélie replies that '[she doesn't] forget a thing. Not a thing' (pp. 57-58). This ominous comment appears to be referring to more than just Aurélie's stay in jail. She seems here to embody the memory of the Native people, and to denounce the cruelties they suffered in the past. Her character comes back to haunt the mind of the heroine, and to avenge herself and, it seems, by extension her ancestors, of the colonial injustices done to them. The sense of threat emanating from the servant is emphasised by the indication that her 'voice [is] shrill, as she jumps aside. Crouching. About to pounce', which makes Elisabeth anxiously conclude that she has to 'act fast. Protect [herself] from Aurélie's rage', but the impression is that it is already too late (pp. 57-58).

The American Doctor: Guilty of Being Foreign?

Dr. George Nelson's status as a foreigner is crucial in the text and, it seems, partly responsible for the role he plays in the novel's tragedy, that is, being Elisabeth's lover and the murderer of her husband. Nelson's foreignness is, surprisingly but persistently, associated with a malevolent, almost demonic, aura, and subsequently to his breaking of the social and legal laws of the nineteenth-century Quebecois community in which he lives. Both these aspects of his character will be explored in this section.

George Nelson is originally of American loyalist descent, and was exiled as a child by his parents who sent him to live in Quebec after the American Revolution. The young Nelson was among many who fled the American colonies' 'deplorable' spirit of independence, and who settled in Canada so as to maintain their allegiance to the crown. In George's case, however, it meant converting to Catholicism, and abandoning his native English tongue for French, in an attempt to assimilate himself into Francophone and Catholic Quebec. Interestingly, although George Nelson is Anglophone and, ultimately, of British descent, he is not an object of respect and admiration among his anglophile Quebecois fellow villagers. On the contrary, the fact that he strives to blend in, and to adjust to the local culture somehow seems to emphasise his difference, and to further antagonise the members of the community against him. In spite of Dr. Nelson's hard work and dedication as a rural physician in a deprived part of Quebec, his former Protestantism and imperfect French are repeatedly emphasised by the local villagers, who see these as valid reasons to reject him. Douglas L. Boudreau points out the importance of the fact that Nelson is Anglophone, as for Boudreau

the '*anglais* Other' is distinct from 'non-*anglais* Others', such as Aurélie Caron, in Hébert's novels. Boudreau adds that the role of the outsider has always been important in the literature of Quebec, 'perhaps because of the peculiar geographic situation of the Québécois'.⁵² Surrounded by 'Anglophone and traditionally Protestant North America', Francophone and traditionally Catholic Quebec is itself 'something of an outsider' in Boudreau's opinion. He also observes that the '*Anglais*' is a reminder of the colonial presence that has affected Quebec history and culture since the British Conquest, and that this is perhaps why 'the *Anglais* represents the consummate outsider in Québécois literature'.⁵³ Boudreau then notices that characters such as Dr. Nelson, with a difference in 'language, culture, and often religion', also represent 'the traditional oppressor of the French-Canadian people'.⁵⁴

I would argue that if Dr. Nelson is dreaded and perceived as a threat in the novel, he nevertheless attempts to integrate himself into the community, if only through the medical aid he ceaselessly provides. His original motive is therefore not to oppress the local people, but to be accepted by them. The text reveals how Dr. Nelson secretly longs for social approval, and dreams of a 'decree' proclaimed in French and in English: 'Doctor George Nelson, [...] is hereby formally accepted, approved, and acknowledged as belonging to said parish of Sorel' (p. 153). His dream, however, quickly turns into a nightmare: 'Found out! Master Nelson, they've found you out! [...] Impostor. Just an impostor... [...] Protestants can't get into Heaven... [...] Foreigners can't get into Heaven...' (pp. 153-54). It thus seems that the persecution is carried out by the Quebecois themselves in this instance, and that it is directed at any individual they judge to be foreign. Indeed, even though George Nelson was brought up in Quebec, and spent most of his life there, the fact that he was born elsewhere condemns him to remain a stranger, and therefore an outcast, in the local Quebecois community. The injustice and narrow-mindedness of such a treatment portrays the local community as being fundamentally closed in upon itself.

Moreover, in the context of the 1960s, when the novel was being written, one might wonder to what degree this could be a comment upon the province's attitude as a whole towards the large-scale immigration from third-world countries to Canada. Like never before, Quebec had to deal with citizens of various nationalities, speaking different languages, and of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. This further complicated the issue of Quebec's cultural identity in relation to the rest of Canada. A symptom of this was the advent of

⁵² Douglas L. Boudreau, 'Anglophone Presence in the Early Novels of Anne Hébert', *The French Review* (Vol. 74, n° 2, 2000), pp. 308-309.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

Quebec's controversial language laws, by which French was enforced as a compulsory language for the offspring of any immigrant whose native tongue was not French or English. The novel goes back to a time when such laws did not exist, and Dr. Nelson's native tongue is obviously English, but it seems nevertheless that the insistence in the text upon the few mistakes he makes when he speaks French, and the comments about the fact that '[h]e's learning French [...]. But [without] very much enthusiasm', could be early indications of Quebec's later attitude towards the imposition of French language upon new immigrants (p. 122).

Interestingly, Dr. Nelson's foreignness also causes him to be perceived as an evil, almost demonic, character by the local community. The latter comments upon his sombre appearance, dark hair and black eyes, and repeatedly call him an 'American devil who goes about casting spells' (p. 111), or 'the very devil himself' (p. 192). The correlation between George Nelson and the devil has been pointed out by many critics, among them Paul Raymond Côté, who underlines that this theme of Satanism, as it is associated in the text with Dr. Nelson, emphasises other forms of marginality and controversy expressed in the novel.⁵⁵ Côté points out that Nelson is Protestant and Anglophone in a 'pays français et catholique', thus clearly linking his demonic aura to his foreignness.⁵⁶ But aside from the novel's possible denunciation of those xenophobic stereotypes, by which foreigners are likened to malevolent forces with evil motives, Côté notices instead that the demonology discourse in the narrative is essentially a literary expression of the individual's refusal to be oppressed by conformism. Côté adds that *Kamouraska* advocates subversion and revolt through its imagery of devil and sorcery, and that the latter becomes a central tool in addressing man's struggle to assert his existence and identity.⁵⁷

Côté also observes that the use of occult and supernatural themes is a characteristic of Quebecois literature, and an expression of the poetics of doubt and uncertainty, which those themes bring about, and which is associated with the social and political instability Quebec has always had to face.⁵⁸ Côté concludes that murder, 'revenants', Satanism, and witchcraft are some of the subject matters used by Hébert to transpose, and even symbolise, the crises of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁵⁵ Paul Raymond Côté, 'Kamouraska ou l'influence d'une tradition', *The French Review* (Vol. 63, n° 1, 1989), p. 107. See also Maurice Édmond, *La Femme à la fenêtre: L'univers symbolique d'Anne Hébert dans Les Chambres de bois, Kamouraska et Les Enfants du sabbat* (Presses de l'Université Laval, Quebec City, 1984), pp. 36-40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-107.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

identity and values afflicting Quebecois society since the British conquest.⁵⁹ It seems both ways of interpreting the presence of an imagery of devil and sorcery in the text are valid: the local community does fear Dr. Nelson's difference, and therefore associates all sorts of dark powers with him, reinforced by the fact that he is a doctor, and thus has a certain control over the life and death of his patients. On the other hand, in the face of the rejection Dr. Nelson suffers from his fellow villagers, he does resort to some desperate action, and ends up breaking the social, legal and religious boundaries of his community.

The link between Dr. Nelson's foreign status and his involvement in the novel's tragedy is indeed central to the narrative. This is visible even in the early stages of his affair with Elisabeth, when she notices that:

Celui qui dit "le" table, au lieu de "la" table, se trahit. Celui qui dit "la Bible", au lieu des "saints Évangiles", se trahit. Celui qui dit "Elisabeth", au lieu de "Mme Tassy", se compromet et compromet cette femme avec lui. (p. 124)

[The man who makes foolish little mistakes in his French gives himself away. The man who speaks of "the Bible" instead of "the Holy Gospels" gives himself away. The man who says "Madame Elisabeth" instead of "Madame Tassy" is sure to compromise himself and her as well. (p. 124)]

Dr. Nelson's affair with a married woman of the local bourgeoisie is specifically read in terms of his foreignness. It seems adultery, an imperfect French, and Protestantism become one and the same crime in the novel, and break the same social rules in the context of a strictly Francophone and Catholic nineteenth-century Quebecois society. Religion, language and proper social behaviour are equated in the text, and form an oppressive social system condemning those who do not conform to its conventions. Crucially, after the murder has taken place, Nelson's difference is, once again, the very thing which gives him away as the guilty murderer. The narrative emphasises how the witnesses are able to identify him through a careful observation of his appearance and manners, the details of his clothing, and the way his sleigh looks. The importance of local, small-scale knowledge is confirmed here again, as it becomes crucial in understanding the subtlety of the witnesses' comments. For instance, they insist upon the fact that 'this man, this stranger [...] was driving a different kind of sleigh, not like the ones we have around here. And his overcoat [...] looked to me like what they make way upriver, a lighter shade than ours. [...] I figured he couldn't be one of us,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

because he made a lot of mistakes when he talked. [...] That man's not one of us. If you ask me he's got an English accent' (pp. 202-206). To have 'an English accent', it seems, is a capital offence of a similar gravity, in the text, to the murder Nelson has actually committed. The focus upon the type of fabric his coat is made of, and upon the type of sleigh he drives, is also indicative of a wish to analyse and identify him as being 'one of us', or not. The constant emphasis on what is 'ours', or like 'us', seems to illustrate Quebec's stifling need for conformism, and its fundamental fear of what differs from its 'norm'. This breaking of the norm is played out quite dramatically in the text, through Dr. Nelson's killing of a member of the local aristocracy, and emphatically illustrates the tensions between Quebecois establishment and 'foreign' influences. Elisabeth herself concludes: 'Found out, Doctor Nelson! You've been found out! Murderer. Stranger...' (p. 248). Being a murderer, in the novel, is thus apparently equal to being a foreigner, and the two are emphasised as being similar faults. Dr. Nelson's guilt is therefore clearly expressed in terms of his being a 'stranger', a status he will never quite transcend in the midst of his Quebecois community.

Conclusion

In *Kamouraska*, Hébert paints a vivid portrait of nineteenth-century Quebec, but a superficial reading of the novel seems to indicate that it ignores the historical and political dimensions of the period. It has been shown, however, that an awareness of those elements is present and influences the narrative throughout. Hébert places her focus on the life of a single character, and presents the period through that character's vision. Interestingly, this protagonist is an adulterous woman accused of complicity in the murder of her husband; she is therefore not a perfect or admirable figure, and the narrative does reveal her shortcomings, biases and failures. However, this focus on a rather controversial and imperfect individual allows the author to look under the surface of the heroine's reprehensible actions, so as to understand the set of circumstances that might have played a part in them, and to reveal in what ways she was possibly as much a victim, as a perpetrator, of the crimes committed.

In this context, the oppressive patriarchy – and matriarchy – of nineteenth-century Quebec is violently denounced and condemned for the coercive rules it imposed upon women, but also upon members of other minorities, such as the indigenous population, or the American loyalist immigrants. Finally, Anne Hébert's wish to explore the repressed lives of nineteenth-century Quebec women, condemned by society for breaking the oppressive laws it had imposed upon them, is indicative of an attempt to redress past injustices, and to assert the

importance of the voices history has excluded and forgotten in its narrative. The next chapter will confirm this attempt on the part of the author, and examine the ways in which Hébert's return to the past allows her to change the destinies of (controversial) female characters unfairly victimised by their society.

Chapter Five:
Re-Writing Women's Destinies
in Anne Hébert's *La Cage* and *L'Île de la Demoiselle*

Anne Hébert's 1990 play *La Cage* is inspired by an actual incident which took place in 1763, just after the British conquest of French Canada. Marie-Josephte Corriveau was the central protagonist of a *fait divers* which saw her convicted by a British martial court for the murder of her second husband, at the age of thirty. She underwent two trials, and was originally found to be only an accomplice to the murder, for which her father, Joseph Corriveau, took responsibility. By an unexpected turn of events, however, Joseph Corriveau later confessed he had lied to protect his daughter, and that he was in fact innocent of the crime. Marie-Josephte then admitted having murdered her husband by hitting him twice on the head with an axe, while he was sleeping. She also laid the blame for her crime upon the abusive treatment and repeated beatings she had received from him.

Marie-Josephte faced a second military trial, and in conformity with English law, she was condemned to death by hanging, and to having her body exposed in an iron cage hung at a crossroad in Pointe-Lévi, across the river from Quebec City, as a way to make an example of her punishment, and deter other potential criminals.¹ However, the local population pleaded to have her body removed, and after forty days she was finally buried. The subject of Marie-Josephte Corriveau comes up again almost a century later, when a cage containing a few human bones was dug up from a local cemetery, and was assumed to be hers.² The particularly shocking, cruel, and exceptional punishment of having a criminal's dead body exposed and buried in an iron cage deeply marked the Quebecois popular imagination, and gave rise to all sorts of legends and myths surrounding the character of *la Corriveau*. She has become an integral part of the history and popular folklore of Quebec, and many songs, oral legends, novels, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and even a ballet, have been produced in

¹ Interestingly, the location where Marie-Josephte Corriveau's cage was hung is today the Quebecois city of Lauzon, where in April 1998 the theatre company Plexus, of the *célep* of Lévis-Lauzon, gave a performance of *La Cage*. See *Le Soleil*, 'Arts et spectacles', Wednesday 15th April 1998.

² For the details of this *fait divers*, see Luc Lacourcière, 'Le Triple destin de Marie-Josephte Corriveau (1733-1763)', *Cahiers des Dix* (Vol. 33, 1968), pp. 213-242.

relation to her story (see Figures 10, 11 and 12, showing reproductions of some of the art and craft-work inspired by *la Corriveau*).

As mentioned in Chapter Four, in the 1960s *la Corriveau* became not only a figure of feminist rehabilitation, but also the incarnation of the nationalist plight, a 'folk heroine, capable of representing Quebec to the outside world'.³ This, however, had not always been the case: Mary Jean Green recalls Luc Lacourcière's article 'Présence de la Corriveau', where he explained how in 1955 there was a project of making an ice statue of *la Corriveau* for Quebec's Winter Carnival. The public's negative response, however, showed to what extent this was perceived as a bad idea, and how a statue of the 'infamous' Corriveau could not be standing side to side with the monument in honour of Cardinal Taschereau, the Archbishop of Quebec City in the nineteenth century; the project had to be abandoned. Ten years later, however, and thanks to the intervention of the Quiet Revolution, *la Corriveau* had been rehabilitated, and was able to be the central protagonist of the aforementioned ballet.⁴ Green explains that the performance was given at Montreal's prestigious new *Place des Arts*, and that it was based on Gilles Vigneault's song on *la Corriveau*, written in 1966, at the height of the Quiet Revolution.⁵ Gilles Vigneault is, according to Green, 'certainly the most important of those singer-songwriters, the *chansonniers*, who in the 1960s helped define the term *québécois*'.⁶ Green points out that this 1966 performance, and the success of Vigneault's song, 'marked a radical change in public attitude toward [the] formerly sinister figure' of *la Corriveau*.⁷ Indeed, the song sought to 'exculpate rather than incriminate' the heroine, and looked to the historical context of the British conquest for reasons for her mis-treatment.⁸ Green concludes that, like the Rebellions of 1837-38, and like 'much of Quebec's newly reinterpreted past, *la Corriveau* emerged in the 1960s from the depths of Quebec's history of oppression to become the symbol of a people victimized and imprisoned within an alien culture.'⁹

This brief summary seeks to set up the historical and cultural context surrounding the story of *la Corriveau* and its later reinterpretations by Quebecois artists, in order to better

³ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 101-102.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63, quoting from Luc Lacourcière, 'Présence de la Corriveau', *Cahiers des Dix* (Vol. 35, 1970), pp. 229-64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.



Figure 10

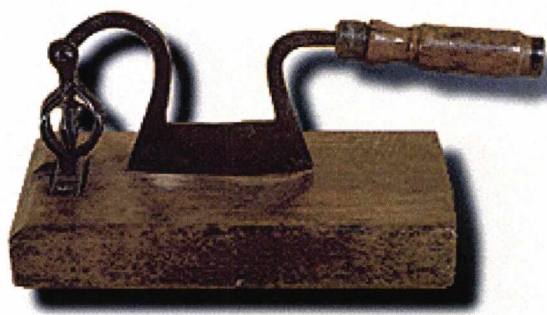


Figure 11



Figure 12

Figure 10: Bronze of *la Corriveau* by Alfred Laliberté, Musée du Québec, Quebec City

Figure 11: Tobacco Cutter (*La Corriveau* in a Cage), Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa (Nineteenth century, wrought iron and wood)

Figure 12: Tobacco Cutter (*La Corriveau* in a Cage), Detail of the figurine on the hinge which probably represents *la Corriveau* in a cage

appreciate Anne Hébert's own attempt at understanding the life-story of this female figure.¹⁰ An important observation to make is that Hébert's play quite significantly alters the actual details of the story, as well as the names of its main protagonists, a point which will be addressed later on. In *La Cage*, Ludivine Corriveau marries Elzéar, a widower many years her elder, out of poverty, and lives an unhappy life with him. He is a cruel and selfish husband with a confirmed taste for hunting, and spends most of the play away on a hunting trip which lasts for several years. In the meantime, Ludivine is left on her own to fend for herself and to cultivate Elzéar's small plot of land. We are given to understand that she can never have any children, but her sterility is counter-balanced in the play by the hospitable and nurturing aspects of her character: she successively takes into her house a newborn baby who is abandoned by its mother, a mentally disabled boy who is beaten by his father, a recently widowed woman who is starving on the streets, and an elderly farm-hand who is too old to carry out any paid work. Progressively, her house becomes a sort of refuge for those of the local community who are in distress, and a place where they can live happily as 'one big family'; they are described in the play as 'Ludivine's adoptive family'. Ludivine also becomes the object of young painter Hyacinthe's desire, and he soon develops feelings of love for her, but their relationship stays platonic.

Nevertheless, her activities raise the suspicion of John Crebessa, an English Judge recently settled in Canada, who is convinced that Ludivine is committing adultery. The play reaches a tragic climax when, one night, Elzéar comes back, unannounced. He frightens Ludivine and the other members of the household into thinking they are being attacked, and out of self-defence Ludivine shoots him with a hunting gun. She realises too late that he is her husband, and he dies shortly after of his gunshot wounds. Ludivine is subsequently accused of murder by Judge John Crebessa, who sees in her action a plot to get rid of her husband. She is given a blatantly unfair trial, where it is clear from the start that her sentence is already decided: Judge Crebessa is intent on getting her hanged, and on having her body exposed in an iron cage. Among the witnesses, Judge Crebessa even has the 'seven Deadly Sins' testify against the heroine. At the very last minute, however, as John Crebessa is about to read the verdict, he suffers a sudden death caused, it seems, by the inability of his 'dark

¹⁰ Among the recent literary re-writings of the story of *la Corriveau* by Quebecois authors, Maureen O'Meara mentions Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's play *Ma Corriveau* (1976), which presents the ambiguity of the case by staging simultaneously two Corriveaus – one guilty and one innocent, and Andrée LeBel's historical novel *La Corriveau* (1981), which retells the story in a way that vindicates and demonstrates the innocence of the heroine. Maureen O'Meara, 'Living with the Cultural Legacy of La Corriveau: *La Cage*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, edited by Janis L. Pallister (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 164-165.

nature' to cope with the love expressed by Hyacinthe for Ludivine. Quite figuratively and literally, therefore, it seems Crebessa dies of a 'heart attack'. Ludivine is then free to go, as is John Crebessa's wife, Rosalinde, and the play ends on a happy scene of celebration. This chapter proposes to examine Anne Hébert's re-interpretation of the famous Quebecois folkloric story, and will focus in particular on her use of the fairy tale form to raise questions as to the nature of historical writing, on the link between the female protagonist and the natural world, and on the representation of marriage as a source of imprisonment for women. Finally, Anne Hébert's other play *L'Île de la Demoiselle* will be examined, so as to see to what extent it also features an attempt on the part of the author to re-interpret the life story of a victimised female figure from the past.

A Fairy Tale 'Herstory'

The play's structure is very similar to that of a fairy tale: a narrator conveys the story to the audience, and presents the various settings, protagonists, and elements of the action, both on stage and off stage. Moreover, the list of characters includes such participants as 'the father of Ludivine', 'the mother of Ludivine', 'Old Man', or 'Woman', who are not given any specific names or characteristics, and who thus become generic, or type-cast characters, as are often found in fairy tales. The list of characters also mentions seven 'White Fairies', and seven 'Black Fairies', who are real protagonists in the story, and 'seven Deadly Sins', who appear at Ludivine's trial, each present as an actual individual. The recurrence of the number 'seven', the symbolism of the colours 'black' and 'white', as well as the actual nature of these characters, all seem to locate the play within the genre of the fairy tale, or fable.

The fairy tale structure also comes up in the fact that the characters are fundamentally divided along the lines of 'good' and 'bad', victims and persecutors; the former are rewarded with freedom, love and happiness, and the latter punished with death. Among the 'bad' characters, we notice a 'wicked step-family', namely Elzéar's in-laws from his first marriage, who deeply dislike Ludivine. Moreover, the play's happy ending for the young charming suitor reunited with his beloved, and the rich heiress delivered from the malevolent brute holding her prisoner, is yet again in keeping with fairy tale conventions. Grazia Merler explains how the play revolves around a simple, but subversive intrigue where tragedy is transformed into fairy tale, while Micheline Cambron notices that the narrative technique of

the tale, and the refusal to follow the narrative order dictated by historiography, are highlighted in Hébert's play, and mix debate with magic.¹¹

The play's uni-dimensional characters, typical of fairy tale protagonists, also recall the basic Christian belief in Good and Evil, and of reward for goodness and punishment for sin. The fact that *La Cage* draws on both religious and fairy tale symbols, as in 'Fairies' paired up with 'Deadly Sins', thus seems to bring about a criticism and a satire of the puritanical religious beliefs of John Crebessa and of Ludivine's fellow villagers, as illustrated in the play by their intolerance and narrow-mindedness. This association of religion with myth is also visible in the opening of the play, which describes the birth scenes of Ludivine and Rosalinde, on each side of the Atlantic Ocean, and each attended by the White and Black Fairies. In a story line reminiscent of *Sleeping Beauty*, where fairy God-mothers make gifts and give omens to the newborn baby princess, Ludivine and Rosalinde receive the like from the White, or 'good' Fairies, and the Black, or 'wicked' Fairies. By a turn of fate, however, Ludivine is only given poisonous gifts and curses from the Black Fairies, who wish her to remain poor, illiterate, sterile, unloved by her future husband and bound to slave-work.

The religious element comes, however, in the fact that these birth scenes are described in the stage directions as a '[c]rèche vivante à droite, crèche vivante à gauche'¹² [nativity scene on the left, nativity scene on the right].¹³ As the Fairies bring their gifts, the parents of each baby are kneeling close over their daughter, who is resting on the ground before them. The scenes are thus deeply evocative of the birth of Jesus, and the Fairies do remind one of the visit of the three Kings. Grazia Merler notes that the Fairies parody the birth of Christ, as is suggested by the indication that they are 'lourdes d'étranges merveilles cachées [...]. Nous cherchons deux enfants nouveau-nés. L'étoile qui nous guida [...] s'est éteinte soudain'¹⁴ [heavy with strange and hidden marvels [...]. We are looking for two newborn babies. The star guiding us [...] has suddenly disappeared]. Hébert's play thus seems to create a parallel between Judeo-Christian myths and fairy tale conventions, subverting in the process the holiness of the beliefs the religious myths have given birth to. Indeed, by drawing links between fairy tales and religion, Hébert seems to demonstrate the similarities of symbols and systems of belief between both. She also performs an interesting gender transformation by

¹¹ Grazia Merler, 'Cage de Fer', *Canadian Literature* (n° 133, 1992), p. 188; Micheline Cambron, "'La Cage'", suivi de "'L'Île de la Demoiselle'", *Cahiers de théâtre JEU* (n° 60, 1991), p. 201.

¹² Anne Hébert, *La Cage*, suivi de *L'Île de la Demoiselle* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 1990), p. 16. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

¹³ My translation. All further translations of the text will be my own.

¹⁴ Grazia Merler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 189, quoting from Anne Hébert, *La Cage*, suivi de *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 13.

presenting us with what could be seen as two female Christs, who will be persecuted by the puritan society of the time in the play, and become martyrs to the cause of women's freedom. This, once again, seems to highlight Hébert's attempt at undermining the authority of the religious ideology which has played a part in women's social oppression in the past.

Another important element of the fairy tale genre is the figure of the witch, present in the play through the characters of the Black Fairies, who create chaos and havoc wherever they go, and revel in their evilness. The heroine, on the other hand, is simply benevolent and charitable, she does good around her but does not possess any 'magic' powers, beyond her ability to relate to the wilderness at a deeper sensorial level. The point is important to make as *la Corriveau*, as she has inhabited Quebecois oral and written folkloric tradition over the past two hundred and forty years, has often been described as a witch. A version of her story claimed that she killed as many as seven husbands, and that her ghost, still imprisoned in her cage, appears to travellers at night (see Figure 13).¹⁵ Another interesting description of *la Corriveau* makes her a poisoner, descending directly from the famous poisoner Catherine Deshayes, also known as *la Voisin*, who was hanged in Paris in 1680.¹⁶ As mentioned earlier, the trope of the witch was recurrent in the work of Quebecois women writers during the 1970s: in an attempt to define symbols and values proper to women, these writers sought to create 'a complex figure, at once symbolic and real, historical and metaphorical'. In this process, many wrote about 'Québec's own native witch', *la Corriveau*.¹⁷

Although Hébert has used the figure of the witch previously in her work, as in her 1975 novel *Les Enfants du sabbat*, in which she develops the idea that witchcraft is a gift transmitted from mother to daughter, and which establishes a line of female ancestry rebelling against oppressive patriarchal social structures, she does not choose to make a witch out of her *Corriveau*.¹⁸ Ludivine is a caring and compassionate character, a victim of the evilness of others, but not a perpetrator of it herself. This emphasises her innocence, and the fact that, despite the ill-treatment she receives from Elzéar, she kills him only out of self-defence and by accident. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Marie-Josephte Corriveau was 'transformed' into a witch by her fellow Quebecois: she was condemned solely for murder, but it seems the shocking and exceptional character of her punishment, as well as rumours that she might have

¹⁵ See Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé's novel *Les Anciens Canadiens* (Quebec City, 1863).

¹⁶ See William Kirby's novel *The Golden Dog* (New York, 1877).

¹⁷ Lori Saint-Martin, 'Écriture et combat féministe: Figures de la sorcière dans l'écriture des femmes au Québec', *Québec Studies* (n° 12, 1991), p. 67. See also Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 'La Sorcière dans le texte (québécois) au féminin', *The French Review* (Vol. 58, n° 2, 1984), pp. 260-68.

¹⁸ In this respect, one notices continuities between the figure of the witch in *Les Enfants du sabbat* and in Kirby's *The Golden Dog*.



Figure 13: Illustration by Henri Julien, from Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé's novel *Les Anciens Canadiens* (Quebec City, 1863)

killed her first husband too, struck the popular imagination and gave rise to all sorts of superstitious speculation. Mary Jean Green has described the double oppression, or 'double colonisation', suffered by *la Corriveau*: although 'it is a foreign conqueror that hanged her as a murderess, it is the patriarchal discourse of her own society that condemned her as a witch.'¹⁹ Moreover, as we saw earlier in the discussion of Atwood's poem 'Half-Hanged Mary', the progression from murderess to witch was, in Green's words, 'almost inevitable, for witchcraft is the ultimate crime with which women have traditionally been charged, both in history and in fairy tales.'²⁰ Green adds that contemporary re-examination of witchcraft accusations has shown that they were often a way of condemning social marginality and punishing female deviance. She notices as well that in recent years, feminists have done a good deal to rehabilitate the image of the witch, both by 'exposing its function as a tool of social repression', but also by 'recasting witchcraft as an expression of female power', both tropes which were particularly pertinent to the study of Atwood's poem.²¹

Moreover, research into some of the circumstances surrounding the actual historical incident has shown that Marie-Josephte was ill-treated and abused by her second husband; some time before the murder, she asked the English Major in charge of the province for permission to leave him. The Major refused, however, on the grounds that if he had to authorise every battered woman to leave her husband, this would cause total chaos in the colony. Janis L. Pallister concludes that this attitude is very telling of the cultural phenomenon that was domestic violence at the time.²² Marie-Josephte thus did not have many alternatives, and killing her husband might have been the only way she had to protect her life. Hébert's play seems to take these facts into account in its representation of a central protagonist who is fundamentally good, but vilified by both the foreign authorities and her fellow villagers. Judge John Crebessa suspects Ludivine of adultery and pronounces her guilty before her trial has even begun, while Elzéar's in-laws declare that '[l]a débauche la plus infâme, l'orgie, le sabbat, toutes les cochonnetés de la terre se donnaient rendez-vous dans la cabane de Ludivine Corriveau' (pp. 93-94) [the most infamous debauchery, orgy, Sabbath, and all the world's obscenities would meet in Ludivine Corriveau's shack]. We find here again the motif of witchcraft, or evil doings, emerging in the testimony of Ludivine's

¹⁹ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, Op. Cit., p. 102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²² Janis L. Pallister, 'La Corriveau, historique et légendaire', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, edited by Janis L. Pallister (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), p. 341, quoting from Andrée LeBel, *La Corriveau* (Éditions Libre Expression, Montmagny, 1981), pp. 53-54.

fellow Quebecois, as it did in the case of Marie-Josephte. Hébert seems to highlight the cruel and prejudiced process by which a woman accused of murder is demonised by her society. In this particular instance, the author reveals not only the role played by the foreign conqueror, but also that played by Quebec itself in the victimisation of some of its own citizens. Hébert also denounces, once again, the injustice and the oppressive nature of the (patriarchal) social laws of the time which denied women any access to divorce, or protection against domestic violence.

As with *Alias Grace* and *Kamouraska*, the play makes no mention of any actual historical event or name. The only fact which helps ground the action into a specific time period is the mention of John and Rosalinde Crebessa's trip from England to Canada, and their settlement there, which seems to symbolise the transfer of colonial power from France to England in 1763. This was also the year that Marie-Josephte Corriveau was tried and executed, and thus appears to confirm the time of the play; but it seems the story of *la Corriveau* is so well-known and culturally mainstream in Quebec that it does not need to be introduced by any historical framework. It is not as well-known in Europe, however, and particularly in France where the play was also published, and where the name of 'Corriveau' would have had very little cultural reference. It seems Hébert, once again, chooses a subject grounded in a very specific geographic and cultural context, that of her natal Quebec after the British conquest, but yet treats it as if it were part of mainstream popular culture, abroad as much as at home. One can see in this attitude an attempt at establishing the worth of certain aspects of a culture described as 'minor' by the hegemonic centre, a trope also present in both *Kamouraska* and *Le Premier jardin*.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Linda Hutcheon sees this concern with the notion of marginalisation, or with the state of what can be called 'ex-centricity', as one of the key aspects of post-colonial writings. Indeed, in granting value to (what the centre calls) the margin or the Other, the post-colonial challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality.²³ By telling her own version of the story of *la Corriveau*, Anne Hébert re-writes this particular aspect of Quebecois popular history and addresses the problematic role played by the foreign conqueror, as well as the gender-biased representations of women by coloniser and colonised alike. Through her focus on this particular incident, and her choice to turn it into a piece of literature, Hébert is able to valorise the story of *la Corriveau* and to figuratively repair the wrongs done to her in the past.

²³ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Op. Cit., p. 72.

Regarding the play's protagonists and their relation to historical accuracy, Judge John Crebessa stands out: he is not an actual historical character, but yet he is 'historical' in so far as Hébert's work is concerned. It was mentioned in Chapter Four that Judge John Crebessa is briefly referred to on two occasions in *Kamouraska*, where he becomes the symbol of Elisabeth's paranoid fear that she is being watched, and that the authorities are trying to catch her compromising her hard-earned appearance of innocence and dignity. In *La Cage*, however, Judge John Crebessa plays a much more central role: he is the chief agent of persecution of the heroine, and is described as a dark character motivated by malevolent purposes. His 'malice' is played out on two different levels: the bias and superiority he shows towards the local Quebecois people, which seems to be linked to the fact that he is 'from England', and the misogyny he shows towards Ludivine and Rosalinde, his wife. One might find surprising, however, that a character who does not possess any actual historical existence should be mentioned twice, in two different literary works, twenty years apart from each other. The recurrence of the character's name, and the similarities in his role in each story, thus seem to show the author's wish to draw a link between both works, and to have Elisabeth's story in *Kamouraska* and Ludivine's in *La Cage* read in light of each other. Beyond the resemblances between the two heroines' predicaments, as they both face the law and death penalty for the murder of an abusive husband, it seems Hébert is not only telling Elisabeth d'Aulnières's and Ludivine Corriveau's story, but also every woman's (her)story, regardless of the historical period in which she lives. Hébert thus does not simply 're-write' history but also seems to transcend it by going beyond its temporal boundaries, and showing the presence of a fundamental link between oppressed women through the ages.

In this context, the use of the fairy tale form also helps establish the idea of a tale incessantly repeating itself, and carrying truths, or values, relevant to any audience, regardless of their historical era. The fairy tale transcends the normal human boundaries of time and reality by featuring timeless and 'supernatural' events, or characters. It also has implications in terms of a particular notion of historical narrative: indeed, the prominence of the Fairies in the play, and the way in which they dictate the future, seem to suggest that historical events are pre-determined, and that history is pre-ordered along criteria of birth, class and gender. However, the fact that the Fairies' predictions do not eventually come true highlights the importance of the role played by the heroine: she shows that by resisting this pre-determination, she is able to change a fate which, at first, seemed immutable. The fairy tale form thus becomes a crucial tool for Hébert in her denunciation of the relentless oppression women have suffered in the past, but also in her illustration of the fact that the course of

history can be altered through opposing this oppression, and, ultimately, through the intervention of artistic expression.

Ludivine Corriveau, a Quebecois 'Earth Mother'

Nature and the free wilderness of the New World are important themes in the play, and are linked to an expression of gender. Male characters stand out by their inherent malice and their dislike of Nature, or persistent attempt at destroying it, as with Elzéar's taste for hunting and general killing of any life forms. Female characters, on the other hand, and Ludivine in particular, but also Babette, her adopted daughter and the play's narrator, are at ease and in harmony with Nature, and pay special attention to the rhythms of seasonal change and animal life. Ludivine seems to be able to communicate with Nature at a deeper level, and to be at one with the needs and offerings of the wilderness; she thus seems to have fully embraced her *américanité*, and to have welcomed the potential for change available in the New World. Besides, in the context of a play emphasising the arrival of the coloniser from England to Canada, and symbolically describing the divide between the two continents, one feels the need to link the treatment of the trope of Nature to that of the particularities attached to the wilderness of the New World, particularities which are lost upon the Eurocentric coloniser, but which are celebrated by the local female Quebecois folks.

John Crebessa is a good example of the coloniser's suspicions towards the New World: he forbids his wife Rosalinde to wander in the wilderness, for fear of the effects this might have on her, while he himself dislikes the countryside, which he perceives as a corrupting force needing to be tamed and controlled. Indeed, he describes his role as 'gardien des mœurs de ce pays' (p. 97) [keeper of this country's morals], thus emphasising the link he sees between colonisation, taming Nature, and establishing civilisation, in the form of European-based social 'morals'. However, the play highlights how Crebessa's civilising aims are destructive towards the harmoniously balanced realm of the natural world: the colonial intervention disrupts the natural order, which brings about the suggestion that the coloniser is unfit to rule the land.

An exception among the male characters and their negative attitude to Nature is the young painter Hyacinthe: he shows an ability to relate to, and express the sensibilities of, the natural landscape surrounding him, which becomes clear through the practice of his art. He is a benevolent character, who falls in love with Ludivine's 'soul', and wants to bring her happiness. Critic Kathryn Slott comments upon the role of art in Hébert's play, and focuses

upon the character of Hyacinthe who, according to her, becomes the figure of the artist. Slott points out that through the painter's claim that he wishes to 'mettre [Ludivine] au monde une seconde fois dans la joie' (p. 108) [bear Ludivine to life a second time, in happiness], comes the suggestion that artistic creation can restore *la Corriveau*'s dignity and counteract the negative fate established by the many versions of her culpability.²⁴

Hyacinthe's name is also that of a flower, and this helps the audience operate an automatic connection between his character and the theme of Nature. In the context of a play based on an actual *fait divers* and on actual historical characters, it seems relevant to attach importance to the name modifications made by the author. Regarding the heroine in particular, Hébert retained the name 'Corriveau', but changed 'Marie-Josephte' for 'Ludivine', thus operating a distancing from the evocation of the Virgin Mother and of the 'surrogate father, Joseph'.²⁵ Critic Annabelle M. Rea, among others, points out the 'playful, laughing' connotation of the name 'Ludivine', with its Latin etymology of *ludere*, to play.²⁶ I would argue that the heroine's name also recalls a link with Nature's spiritual world through the sound 'divine', which both evokes 'celestial' or 'heavenly', and 'to guess' or 'foresee' (*deviner* in French). Moreover, 'Ludivine' also reminds one of the French word 'Devin', a druid-like soothsayer/seer from the Gaelic ages who possessed the ability to predict the future thanks to an enhanced knowledge of the natural world. The choice of the name 'Ludivine' thus helps emphasise the idea of the heroine's developed sensual perception of Nature, and of her belonging to the spiritual realm of the natural world. On a similar note, the name 'Rosalinde', although referring to an imagined character, also seems particularly suited in its evocation of the flower the rose, and of mildness through the Germanic etymology *lind*, which means 'mild', or 'kind'. Rosalinde is also called 'fille d'Albion' in the play, and thus combines in the natural symbol of the rose both feminine kindness and English origins (p. 17).²⁷

²⁴ Kathryn Slott, 'La Remise en question de la Corriveau dans *La Cage* d'Anne Hébert', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, edited by Janis L. Pallister (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), p. 158.

²⁵ Annabelle M. Rea, 'Marie-Josephte Becomes Ludivine: The Family Reformed in Anne Hébert's *La Cage*', *Doing Gender: Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s*, edited by Paula Ruth Gilbert and Roseanna L. Dufault (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30. See also Kathryn Slott, *Op. Cit.*, p. 159, where the critic explains that the name of Ludivine evokes the 'playful' dimension of art.

²⁷ It could also be argued that the name 'Rosalinde' recalls Shakespeare's Rosalind in *As You Like It*, where the heroine's journey into the 'green world' of the woods of Arden is a liberating experience from the tyrannical judicial figure of her evil uncle, the Duke. As a result, it seems that the name 'Rosalind' evokes a certain type of female freedom connected with the natural world, a freedom which Judge Crebessa is trying to deny his wife.

The divide between Old World and New World, coloniser and wilderness, is therefore transcended in the play by the opposition between man and woman, as seen through the character of Rosalinde, who is British and a coloniser but ultimately a victim of her husband's cruel patriarchal authority. The analogy between colonial and patriarchal power seems to be reinforced through the choice of a common target for both: Nature, which is opposed to (colonial) civilisation, but equated to a source of freedom for the female characters. The obviously problematic association of the colonised land with the tamed female body is however resolved in Hébert's work through the suggestion that the wilderness ultimately wins over the patriarchal husband and male coloniser (both of whom die in the play), while offering a haven of peace and harmony to those who respect it. The traditional trope that possessing the land is like taking possession of a female body is therefore negated in the play through the successful resistance of both Nature and women.

Ludivine, for instance, finds solace in her contemplation of the surrounding countryside and gains a sense of fulfilment which had originally been denied to her by the intervention of the Black Fairies, at her birth. The heroine's 'unattractive' features, lack of education, unhappy marriage and, most importantly, sterility are transcended through her contact with the natural world. She truly becomes a nurturing figure and a source of life for those in distress in the local community, a form of Quebecois 'earth mother': as Hyacinthe notices, Ludivine '*rayonne partout*' [exerts her influence everywhere] and '*[t]out le paysage et tous ceux qui sont dans ce paysage, bêtes et gens, s'enchantent de vivre avec elle et par elle*' (p. 108) [the entire landscape as well as those living in this landscape, animals and people, delight in living with her and through her]. Ludivine is thus instrumental in bringing and sustaining life, a quality which she was unable to enjoy in her infertile relationship with her husband. Moreover, one notices how her contact with the wilderness brings about a sense of completeness, and not fragmentation, within the heroine's self: unlike the character of Susanna Moodie in Atwood's poem sequence, Ludivine gains a sense of identity through Nature, not by being challenged by the latter, but by enjoying a harmonious relationship with it.

The heroine's 'earth motherliness' also seems to be used in the play to highlight the gaps in the social laws of the time, such as the lack of social welfare, and in particular the lack of social protection for the elderly, the widowed, the orphaned and the mentally disabled. Ludivine fills in those gaps by offering shelter and care to those in distress, but her benevolence is perceived as being disruptive by the authorities, and by Judge Crebessa in particular. The latter wants total control over the colony and feels threatened by the important

role Ludivine plays: '[c]ette créature se mêle de ce qui ne la regarde pas. Moi seul, en ce pays, ai le pouvoir d'exaucer ou de débouter les gens' (p. 69) [this creature interferes in what doesn't concern her. I alone, in this country, possess the power to fulfil people's wishes or to turn them down]. Ultimately, however, nurturing care wins over control obsession, and Crebessa is defeated by Ludivine, and, through her, by the colony.

Annabelle M. Rea sees in Hébert's version of *la Corriveau*'s story a reinforcement of the author's 'long-standing criticism of family structure in Québec'.²⁸ Rea explains that Hébert's treatment of the theme of family in the play is a powerful rejection of the official Quebecois ideology which glorified motherhood, and has historically encouraged women to have large families through the motif of the *revanche des berceaux*. For Rea, Ludivine's 'adoptive family', in the sense of a 'chosen' family, here composed of the excluded members of society, and most importantly her sterility, are ways to oppose this ideology.²⁹ She illustrates this claim with the example of the strange dream Ludivine has in response to her husband's taunts at the fact that she is still not pregnant. Ludivine dreams she is presenting Elzéar with a baby carriage containing an infant with a 'tête de mort' [death's head], thus suggesting, in Rea's opinion, 'Ludivine's death wish for enforced maternity and the traditional family'.³⁰ Ludivine therefore becomes a figure of (silent) resistance to the dominant ideology, and a source of inspiration for other Quebecois women.

The character of Rosalinde Crebessa also illustrates the relationship between gender, Nature and colonisation in the play. She has received the birth gifts of beauty, intelligence and wealth which the White Fairies were unable to give Ludivine, but she nevertheless lives a miserable life with a controlling husband. Only through her final liberation from him and her contact with Nature, it seems, will she be able to find happiness. This end scene reveals, however, that Rosalinde will need to get reaccustomed to the natural world: she is described as having a 'petite figure de hibou, au sortir de la nuit, qui cligne des yeux dans la lumière' (p. 113) [small face, like that of an owl coming out of the darkness, and blinking in the light]. It seems also that ending her marriage to John Crebessa is similar to leaving darkness and entering daylight, while the play suggests that, in this instance, marriage is an act 'against' Nature, an idea which ties in quite well with the dark vision of matrimony found throughout the play, as will be seen in the next section. The challenging wilderness of the New World therefore appears to be a source of inspiration for the oppressed female characters of *La Cage*:

²⁸ Annabelle M. Rea, 'Marie-Josephte Becomes Ludivine: The Family Reformed in Anne Hébert's *La Cage*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

the coloniser attempts to tame it, but eventually fails in his enterprise, the same way the male characters are unsuccessful in their efforts to control the female protagonists.

Interestingly, one also notices that the play carries echoes of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, through its evocation of religion and religious trials, in particular with the image of the seven Deadly Sins testifying against Ludivine, and accusing her of killing her husband, committing adultery and carrying out other 'dark' occupations among the community. The mixture of puritan test of faith and condemnation of the Nature-loving lifestyle of the heroine seems reminiscent of Miller's work. The puritan age which inspired Miller's play also influenced Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, which seems to have resonances in Hébert's play as well. The figure of a central female character being ostracised by her puritan society and whose husband is absent for the better part of the story is very close indeed to the story line of *La Cage*. In both works, the descriptions of the heroine's hard-work and charitable actions are contrasted with accusations of adultery thrown at her by her puritan-minded fellow citizens. Ludivine and Hyacinthe both revel in a celebration of the free wilderness of the New World, which other characters in the play, especially the newly settled colonisers, see as a source of (evil) temptation: this once again recalls the puritan motif described by both Hawthorne and Miller in their works.

Another interesting link with *The Scarlet Letter* is the fact that, originally, Marie-Josephte Corriveau was condemned to have the letter 'M' branded in her left hand, as a sign of her complicity in the murder of her husband. This sentence was not carried out, however, as she was then convicted of the murder itself, and condemned to death by hanging. Although Hébert chooses not to mention this detail in her play, one feels she might very well have been aware of it and have been influenced by it in her rendition of the puritan-led persecution of women in eighteenth-century North America. Moreover, as in *The Crucible*, the witnesses' private agendas and bitter personal feuds are revealed during Ludivine's trial. Elzéar's sisters-in-law, for instance, testify against Ludivine because they resent not having been chosen instead of her when Elzéar remarried: 'Pauvre cher Elzéar, paix à son âme, il aurait bien mieux fait de se remarier avec l'une de ses trois belles-soeurs [...] au lieu de cette assassine de Ludivine Corriveau' (p. 93) [Poor dear Elzéar, may he rest in peace, he would have done better to remarry with one of his three sisters-in-law [...] instead of Ludivine Corriveau, that murderess]. The dramatic and novelistic parallels with Miller and Hawthorne thus highlight the fact that Hébert's play is inscribed within a particular framework of cultural

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29, quoting from Anne Hébert, *La Cage*, suivi de *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.

references, and seems to have been influenced by the latter. Hébert's authorial intentions differ, however, from Hawthorne and Miller's, in that she aims to denounce the *Nouvelle France*-based religious zeal of the early colonisers, and the plight suffered by women, specifically, at the time. One might thus wonder to what degree her play can be seen to draw from central tropes expressed by the American literary canon, so as to better re-appropriate those and apply them to the needs of a Quebecois imagination.

The Cage of Matrimony

The play features a strong criticism of marriage, which is represented as an abusive prison, a cage like the one used to punish criminals in the story. The title of the play therefore refers to both the punishment received by *la Corriveau*, and, more generally, to women's imprisonment through matrimony. The metaphor is enacted on a very literal level, through the presence of two cages on stage, one on each side of the Atlantic Ocean and for each of the main female protagonists. Rosalinde's cage is golden, a *clin d'oeil* to the French expression 'une cage dorée', often referring to a wealthy, but unhappy, union. During the scene of John and Rosalinde's wedding celebration, the golden cage is decorated with white ribbons and flowers, thus highlighting the parallels between marriage and prison, regardless of how 'pretty' the cage might be. The scene ends with Rosalinde entering the cage and John locking her up and keeping the key, which comes to symbolise the instrument of the wife's persecution by her husband. Being the keeper of the key gives ultimate power to John over the destiny of his wife, and over that of Ludivine too later on, when he attempts to pass a death sentence upon her and to have her body imprisoned in a cage. The key also seems to become the phallic symbol of John's sexual and authoritarian desire over these women's bodies: 'j'affirmerai mes droits de maître et d'époux. [...] Que seule la clef de fer demeure intacte, reconnaissable entre toutes, dans ma main' (pp. 36-37) [I'll assert my rights as master and husband. [...] May only the iron key remain intact, recognisable between all, in my hand]. The scene of John and Rosalinde's wedding does echo those suggestions of possession through violence, both physically and morally. The bride's loss of virginity in particular, which is associated with the loss of her (maiden) name, is described as a rather coercive act, as illustrated through the song of the guests' choir:

Couvre les cris de la mariée
Dans les bras de son époux

Au premier soir de ses noces. [...]
La mariée a perdu son nom et sa couronne,
Pour le meilleur et pour le pire,
Jusqu'à ce que mort s'ensuive,
Est devenue Lady John Crebessa. (pp. 35-36)

[Cover the cries of the bride
In her groom's arms
On her first wedding night. [...]
The bride has lost her name and her garland,
For better and for worse,
Until death do them part,
Has become Lady John Crebessa.]

The grotesque discrepancy between the traditionally merry singing, typical of a wedding celebration, and the actual words of the guests' song somehow emphasises the bride's powerlessness, and the institutionalisation of her cruel predicament. Marriage is thus described as the tool of women's oppression, both physically, through the loss of virginity and the confinement to the home, a form of domestic 'cage', and morally, through the loss of identity. In this context, the traditional wedding vow for a husband and wife to remain together until 'death do them part' becomes a sombre omen, laden with a sense of foreboding as to the ways in which women can set themselves free from the 'prison' of matrimony.

The play also raises important class issues through Ludivine's arranged marriage to Elzéar, brought on by the fact that her family suffers from starving poverty, and that her parents are 'cursed' in having two daughters. Ludivine's union to Elzéar is indeed clearly defined in mercantile terms by her parents: '[v]u que les filles n'ont que tout juste leurs hardes sur le dos, ni trousseau, ni terre, ni maison bâtie [...] faut pas être trop difficile' (p. 40) [given that the girls only just have the rags on their back, no trousseau, no land, no built house [...] you can't be too fussy]. Ludivine's cage in the play is simply made of iron, and has black ravens resting on it, seemingly waiting for her body to be locked inside. Once again, the imagery of death and decay, through Crebessa's repetitive jubilations at the idea that the ravens will pick at Ludivine's eyeballs and at her dead body, helps emphasise the harsh treatment of the female protagonists by the male characters in the play, and as a result, produces a negative and destructive vision of marriage. Consequently, the idea of husband murder out of self-defence and protection, already raised in *Kamouraska*, is clearly expressed and enacted in *La Cage*: Ludivine admits during her trial, '[j]'ai voulu me protéger [...]. J'ai tiré, par peur, pour me défendre' (p. 102) [I tried to protect myself [...]. I shot out of fear, to defend myself].

A crucial aspect of the nature of Ludivine's – and Marie-Josephte Corriveau's – punishment is that it came to symbolise the cruelty of the coloniser, the English 'nouveaux maîtres', whose sentence was perceived as a symptom of their cultural difference, and would inspire and haunt Quebecois imagination for centuries to come. The practice of exposing a criminal's dead body in a cage 'indefinitely' was totally unheard of and deeply shocking to the French Canadian population of the time. In England, however, this was a very current legal practice, and remained so up until the nineteenth century.³¹ *La Corriveau's* sad fate thus became inextricably linked to an old British custom, and came to be seen as an expression of a foreign and potentially cruel power. Additionally, the fact that this punishment was only ever used on one other occasion throughout Canada's history, helps emphasise the extraordinary aspect of *la Corriveau's* death, and possibly explains the numerous legends and superstitions her story gave rise to.

It is important to note as well that Marie-Josephte Corriveau was tried by martial court: there is a sense that she was not given a fair trial because of this, and critic Mary Jean Green has pointed out that the evidence under which she was convicted seemed 'circumstantial at best.'³² In Hébert's play, Ludivine is not tried by martial court, but her trial is clearly shown to be a parody of justice, as seen through the intervention of the seven Deadly Sins, which are 'invités d'honneur [au] procès' (p. 94) [guests of honour at the trial], and which help highlight the oppressive religious and social prejudices set against Ludivine. Her sentence is also pronounced before her trial has even begun, an illustration perhaps of both the irregularity of the judicial proceedings involved, and of the ineluctability of her fate.

Moreover, the trial is clearly defined in terms of British law, as seen in the reference to the 'témoins de la Couronne' (p. 90) [Crown's witnesses]. As was mentioned in Chapter Four, this theme of a woman accused under foreign law and in a foreign language is also present in *Kamouraska*. In *La Cage*, however, there is no mention of an Anglo-French linguistic divide, but one knows from the historical records of Marie-Josephte's trial that the Judge and Jury were British military men who did not speak French, while the Defence lawyer spoke French, but not English. The unavoidable language rift which must have ensued could also have affected the proceedings of the trial. Hébert's play, while making no mention of the use of foreign language, does suggest that Ludivine is a victim of political, and more particularly colonial, circumstances, that she is unable to fully grasp the laws by which she is judged, and that, as a result, she cannot defend herself effectively.

³¹ Luc Lacourcière, 'Le Triple destin de Marie-Josephte Corriveau (1733-1763)', *Op. Cit.*, p. 238.

³² Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 100.

Interestingly, the first direct access to the archive documents of Marie-Josephte Corriveau's two trials was made possible only in 1947, when Quebecois-led research finally located them in London, at the Public Record Office.³³ The difficulty in obtaining copies of these documents, and the fact that they were kept abroad, namely within the imperial centre of British power, increased the atmosphere of doubt and suspicion which had always surrounded the case. Indeed, it is still felt today that Marie-Josephte Corriveau's sentence was unfair, and symptomatic of an attempt by the coloniser to gain control over the (recently) colonised French Canada. It seems the English authorities viewed *la Corriveau*'s crime as being particularly undermining to them, not only because it involved murder, but also because it was committed by a woman. In this context, Luc Lacourcière points out that the original death sentence, as it was given to Joseph Corriveau, Marie-Josephte's father, did not make any mention of the body being hung in a cage.³⁴ This modality seems to have been added especially for Marie-Josephte. Moreover, Janis L. Pallister insists that in *la Corriveau*'s case, we are dealing with a 'political' justice rather than an 'absolute' justice, while Maureen O'Meara observes that, perhaps, 'the undermining of male authority in the families of the "Canadiens" was seen as destructive to the order of the colony by its new British masters'.³⁵ One can thus easily see why *la Corriveau* has become such a powerful symbol of the expression of the victimisation of Quebec by a foreign order. However, Anne Hébert's particular stance in her interpretation of *la Corriveau*'s story emphasises her choice to highlight the ways in which women were specifically affected by that foreign power, and, most importantly, the double persecution they suffered through the agency of their own patriarchal society.

***L'Île de la Demoiselle*, or Re-Writing Female Exile into Female Empowerment**

This section will examine Anne Hébert's radio play *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, which was first read on 'France-Culture' in 1974, then published in *Les Écrits du Canada français* in 1979, and published again, jointly with *La Cage*, in 1990. The play revolves around a true story set in 1542, when Jean Laroque de Roberval, captain of an expedition of three ships on their way to Canada, leaves France on a mission to found a French colony on the new continent, as requested by King François I. The mission eventually failed, and after a harsh winter in

³³ Luc Lacourcière, 'Le Triple destin de Marie-Josephte Corriveau (1733-1763)', *Op. Cit.*, p. 215.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

Canada, Roberval and the rest of the colonists all returned to France, with the exception of a young French noblewoman and her maid, whom Roberval had sent into exile on a desert island, on their way to the New World. The lady was Marguerite de Nontron and Roberval's niece, and the reason for her punishment was that her jealous uncle had found out she had a love interest in one of the artisans on board the ship. Marguerite was abandoned on the *île des Démons* (island of Demons), in the estuary of the St Lawrence River, where her lover joined her and her maid. The rough conditions of life on the island, and the severe winter in particular, claimed the lives of her lover, her maid, and the child Marguerite gave birth to, while only she remained alive, to survive on her own. She was eventually discovered and rescued twenty-nine months later by fishermen from Brittany who took her back to France.³⁶

This historical anecdote was first told by Marguerite de Navarre in her *Heptaméron* (1540-49), where the story features in 'Novel Sixty-Seven', and by André Thévet, the King's cosmographer, in his *Cosmographie universelle* (1575); but the story has also inspired more recent creative re-readings, among which is Anne Hébert's play.³⁷ This play, although set in 1540, stays very close to the events of the original story, and keeps the names of the main protagonists almost unchanged: when Jean-François La Roque de Roberval's ships hit a terrible storm on their way to Canada, the colonists feel the trip is cursed and that someone on board must have committed a 'sin'. They direct their suspicion at Marguerite de Nontron, Roberval's ward, and it is discovered, to Roberval's horror, that Marguerite has fallen in love with Nicolas Guillou, a modest carpenter. Roberval, who had clearly from the beginning of the trip attempted to woo Marguerite, is infuriated by this insult, and punishes her by abandoning her on the *île des Démons* with Charlotte, her maid. Nicolas escapes from the ship and joins his beloved on the island. But the lack of food and the bad weather render the living conditions so hard that Nicolas, Charlotte, as well as Marguerite's newborn child, die. Marguerite survives against all odds on her own, and swears a bloody revenge on the person of Roberval. She suffers from delirium and has hallucinatory visions in which she sees him murdered. Sailors eventually find her two years and five months later, and tell her that Roberval has died from a mysterious death, with the same injuries as those Marguerite had wished upon him. Relieved at the news, she agrees to go back to France, and the sailors rename the island 'île de la Demoiselle' in her honour.

³⁵ Janis L. Pallister, 'La Corriveau, historique et légendaire', *Op. Cit.*, p. 341, and Maureen O'Meara, 'Living with the Cultural Legacy of La Corriveau: *La Cage*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 176.

³⁶ For the details of this story, see D.W. Russell, 'Quatre versions d'une légende canadienne', *Canadian Literature* (n° 94, 1982), pp. 172-78.

The play thus returns to the time when France carried out its very first colonial project in North America, and clearly sets up the political context of that period. It is interesting to note that the official intentions of the colonists, namely to carry out the religious conversion of the ‘savages’, and to establish ‘une colonie très catholique’³⁸ [a very catholic colony],³⁹ are counter-balanced by ‘unofficial’ reasons, motivated by the appeal of the ‘gold’ and ‘diamonds’ to be found in abundance in the New World, and by the sixteenth-century misconception that Canada is ‘un petit bout de l’Asie fabuleusement riche’ (p. 123) [the little tip of fabulously wealthy Asia], and that its spices ‘poussent dans la neige’ (p. 124) [grow in the snow]. Therefore, under cover of religious zeal, the play illustrates the mercantile interest of the colonists and their Eurocentric prejudices: when speaking of the Natives, one nobleman declares ‘ils n’ont pas d’âme et il faudra les massacrer tous’ (p. 123) [they have no soul and we will have to kill them all]. Moreover, the play also reveals some of the political tensions surrounding Marguerite’s punishment. Roberval is indeed said to be a former Protestant, who had been exiled for his faith, and allowed back in France by King François I upon condition that he converted to Catholicism. After doing so, he also had to comply with the King’s request to take a ship expedition to Canada on a religious mission, ‘afin d’afficher sa conversion aux yeux de tous’ (p. 122) [so as to flaunt his conversion for all to see]. However, when the storm hits the ships, and rumours start spreading that the expedition is cursed, Roberval is only too keen to find another culprit to divert suspicion from him. Marguerite’s ‘illegitimate’ love affair provides such a diversion, and Roberval thus has both personal and political reasons to punish her behaviour, and to make an example of that punishment. She therefore pays the price of her liberty – and, possibly, that of her life – for falling in love with a man below her station, but also, in order to save the Captain’s honour.

The first part of the play, set on board the ship, thus shows the unfair victimisation of the heroine, and in what ways the society of the time was corrupted by hypocrisy and greed, as condoned by the Church. D.W. Russell observes that in that society, women’s behaviour is dictated by the patriarchy who, in the person of Captain Roberval, is ‘maître à bord, après Dieu’⁴⁰ [master on board, after God]. Captain Roberval is indeed not only responsible for finding a suitable match for Marguerite (which he covets for himself), but also for

³⁷ Russell mentions two other recent re-imaginings of the story by Canadian artists: George Woodcock’s 1977 play *The Island of Demons*, and Barry Pearson’s 1979 film ‘Marooned in the Land God Gave to Cain’.

³⁸ Anne Hébert, *La Cage*, suivi de *L’Île de la Demoiselle* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 1990), p. 119. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

³⁹ My translation. All further translations of the text will be my own.

⁴⁰ D.W. Russell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 176, quoting from Anne Hébert, *La Cage*, suivi de *L’Île de la Demoiselle*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 137.

administering her land and fortune. Moreover, Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa sees in the coloniser's desire 'to reserve Marguerite for himself' the fact that 'in a sense, she mirrors the supposedly uninhabited land he is going to settle in Canada.'⁴¹ Through the figure of Roberval therefore, we are presented with an oppressive view of men's power, a power which carries ultimate authority over women. When the heroine fails to respect that authority, Roberval pronounces a death sentence against her by deporting her to the desert *île des Démons*. In this regard, Roberval becomes very similar to Judge Crebessa in *La Cage*, or to Antoine Tassy in *Kamouraska*, and becomes a symbol of women's persecution and patriarchal domination. Mélissa McKay notices that in the play, the heroine is not only imprisoned figuratively in the society in which she lives, but she is also literally locked up on several occasions. McKay points to the recurrent imagery of imprisonment, confinement and exile in the play, as when Marguerite is abandoned on the desert island, but also during the trip, where she is confined to her cabin in the ship's hold, and through the references to her childhood, spent in a convent.⁴² Once again, such imagery is also present in *La Cage*, and to a certain degree in *Kamouraska*, as discussed previously, and helps emphasise the subservience of women's social status. It is interesting to note, however, that *L'Île de la Demoiselle* offers a rather positive vision of marriage, and not that of a prison-like 'cage', as found in *La Cage* and *Kamouraska*, through the fact that Marguerite and Nicolas fall in love and freely choose each other. Nevertheless, their union is not sealed by any 'official' or religious ceremony, but based solely on their mutual agreement and understanding.

In the second part of the play, set on the *île des Démons*, the wilderness provides a space in which the heroine can be liberated from the dictates of civilisation, and more particularly, from those of patriarchy. Marguerite is indeed seen to progressively lose her 'conditioning' as a young noblewoman, and to become more and more 'animalised' through her contact with the wilderness, like the character of Susanna Moodie in Atwood's poem cycle. The arrival on the island is described in terms of a new beginning by the heroine, with ideals reminiscent of those of the discourse of *américanité*. Marguerite questions the relevance of the social class system by taking for her 'husband' a man below her station and by advocating equality of class between her and Charlotte, her maid. The wilderness thus offers a place where the heroine can create a new society of equals: '[c]ette île est un pays

⁴¹ Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, 'The Female Liminal Place, or Survival Between the Rock and the Hard Place: A Reading of Anne Hébert's *L'Île de la Demoiselle*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, edited by Janis L. Pallister (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), p. 190.

sans Seigneur ni Dame, tous égaux' (p. 204) [this island is a country with no Lord nor Lady, all equals], while she tells her unborn child: 'tu naîtras libre et jamais M. de Roberval ou quelque autre puissance de ce monde n'aura de pouvoir sur toi' (p. 204) [you will be born free and never will M. de Roberval or any other powers of this world have control over you]. Marguerite is thus seen to embrace the potential for change available in the New World of the island, and in particular the increased freedom of a society rid of patriarchy. As a result, she progressively abandons her feminine 'proper behaviour', as taught to her by the nuns at the convent, and adopts a 'de-gendered' attitude: 'je porterai le pantalon de Nicolas pour être plus à l'aise, dans mon île' (p. 237) [I will wear Nicolas's trousers to be more at ease, on my island]. The island thus provides a locus where traditional class and gender boundaries are broken and re-defined by the heroine. It is also where she sets about planting a (nutritious) garden, composed of wheat, buckwheat and oats, and tells Nicolas:

Ce rang de blé-là sera sacré et il poussera des enfants comme les coquelicots
mêlés au blé. Nous peuplerons toute l'île. (p. 207)

[This row of wheat will be sacred and children will grow like poppies mingled
with wheat. We will populate the whole island.]

The idea of planting a garden, and the reference to wheat in particular, remind one of Hébert's novel *Le Premier jardin*, which explains how Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet, Hébert's ancestors, were the first colonists to plant a 'garden' in the New World, and how they harvested the first sheaf of wheat. The idea of a 'first garden' suggests also, of course, the Garden of Eden; as Kelton W. Knight has pointed out, 'Marguerite de Nontron becomes a metaphor of Canada's first mother, a primeval Eve who plants the New World's first Garden of Eden.'⁴³ In this context, the fertility of the land is symbolically associated with that of the female body ('children mingled with wheat'), and both are linked in a harmonious way, as with Ludivine and the natural world of *La Cage*.

However, as the conditions of life on the island prove harder and harder for the deportees, the wilderness evolves from the benevolent and inviting setting evoked in *La Cage*, to a rather threatening and potentially deadly world, giving rise to all sorts of scary hallucinations. The wild birds inhabiting the island in particular, become the source of obsessive fears for Marguerite and Charlotte, while Nicolas is eventually attacked and fatally

⁴² Méliissa McKay, 'Le Pouvoir masculin contrarié: La Confrontation entre la femme et l'histoire dans *La Cage* et *L'île de la Demoiselle* d'Anne Hébert', *Études francophones* (Vol. 13, n° 1, 1998), pp. 24-25.

wounded by one of them. Marguerite also has visions that her unborn child is developing monstrous features:

Et si j'allais accoucher d'une créature pleine d'écailles et de plumes? Aïe mon enfant est un monstre. Il me mange le cœur. J'étouffe. Il nous dévorera tous, vous verrez. (p. 217)

[What if I gave birth to a creature covered in scales and feathers? Aïe my child is a monster. He is eating my heart. I'm choking. He will devour us all, you'll see.]

The image of the 'animalised' child evokes some of the tropes of the Gothic already encountered through the description of Susanna Moodie's children in Atwood's poem sequence. In both instances, the contact with the wilderness seems to have strange effects on the female protagonists' vision of maternity, and particularly so in the case of Marguerite, who very clearly associates Nature with motherhood (once again, through the image of the 'children mingled to wheat'). The fear of giving birth to 'monstrous' children, which these female pioneers experience, seems to locate the process of 'animalisation' mentioned earlier in that of maternity: as a result, Mother Nature and the female colonists are linked and likened to a distorted and potentially threatening vision of motherhood. Moreover, the notion of 'deep terror' to be found in Canadian writing is also present in the play, where the island, at first the source of a new beginning, eventually becomes a hostile and sterile environment, causing death and preventing life from springing forth. Ultimately, after her companions and baby have died, Marguerite's fears turn into a rage for revenge, while she loses her civilised self and returns to a primal, animal state:

Mon pauvre Nicolas, ta belle et tendre amoureuse bascule parmi les harpies, perd toute face humaine et s'arme jusqu'aux dents, pour réclamer justice et réparation! (p. 229)

[My poor Nicolas, your beautiful and sweet lover turns into a harpy, loses all human appearance and arms herself to the teeth, to ask for justice and compensation!]

It is as though Marguerite needs to lose her human appearance in order to be empowered and to obtain revenge. Her femininity and social decorum have caused her previous

⁴³ Kelton W. Knight, *Anne Hébert: In Search of the First Garden* (Peter Lang, New York, 1998), p. 39.

powerlessness; only through this process of ‘animalisation’ can she be liberated from a subservient female status. This loss of femininity becomes obvious when the heroine declares: ‘[j]e ne suis plus une femme, ni rien de convenable. Ce que je suis devenue n’a pas de nom en aucune langue connue’ (p. 233) [I am no longer a woman nor anything proper. What I have become has no name in any known language]. The loss of ‘properness’, and in particular the inability to ‘speak’ her state, indicate a total breakdown of civilisation and its values. The lack of language is particularly reminiscent of the displacement and alienation experienced by the character of Susanna Moodie when faced with the untamed Canadian wilderness: in the play, in order to shed her social conditioning, Marguerite has had to renounce language; she is then able to return to a primitive, animal state. Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa notices that ‘[t]he heroine’s journey, even when physical, often becomes a psychological struggle to re-appropriate her space’, where ‘[h]er self becomes the realm of contention to be wrested from the patriarchy’.⁴⁴ She adds that because of ‘its inner nature and because of the role played by physical space, this journey bears many similarities to liminality’, for ‘[i]solation and stripping, characteristics of liminality, become also some of the major features of the heroine’s journey towards repossession and redefinition of her self.’⁴⁵ Therefore, exile provides the means for Marguerite to discard the oppressive values of her society, while the alienation it brings becomes a source of self-definition and empowerment.

This process is not carried out without a struggle however, but described in terms of a tension within Marguerite, between her resistance to the wilderness and her attraction to it. This tension is expressed through an imagined dialogue between the heroine and one of the nuns at her former convent; delirious Marguerite hears the nun admonishing her to behave politely and to accept the submissive role assigned to women:

Une femme n’a pas besoin d’armes pour se défendre. Toujours un galant homme surgit à ses côtés pour la protéger. Vous avez eu tort d’offenser votre protecteur, M. de Roberval. (p. 235)

[A woman has no need of weapons to defend herself. A gentleman will always appear at her side to protect her. You were wrong to offend your protector, M. de Roberval.]

⁴⁴ Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, ‘The Female Liminal Place, or Survival Between the Rock and the Hard Place: A Reading of Anne Hébert’s *L’Île de la Demoiselle*’, *Op. Cit.*, p. 188.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Marguerite, on the other hand, declares that she will not bow down anymore, and reiterates her wish of death upon Roberval: ‘[j]e lui crève les yeux et je lui perce le coeur’ (p. 235) [I put his eyes out and I pierce his heart]. It is in this final state that Marguerite seems to experience ultimate liberation, and it is then that she has a trance-like vision of her tormentor’s murder. We learn subsequently that Roberval has died in a way very similar to that prescribed by the heroine, while the circumstances surrounding his killing remain mysterious, and the murderer is never caught: this seems to constitute the most obvious suggestion of a ‘supernatural’ element in the play. Micheline Cambron has noticed that the play’s threatening and ominous atmosphere, and its evocation of ritual murder, moves the story away from the moralistic tale of female religious devotion told by Marguerite de Navarre in her *Heptaméron*, and transforms the heroine into a witch-like figure who uses magic to bring about the punishment of the villain, namely Roberval.⁴⁶

The achievement of revenge for the wrongs done to her, and the feat of surviving the harsh conditions of life on the island against all odds, do present us with an altered and empowered vision of the heroine. The female figure, persecuted unjustly, becomes a symbol of strength and rebellion for women, through her rejection of the oppressive patriarchal structures of her society. By the end of the play, Marguerite’s description of herself ‘parallels the initial description of the dry, rocky, uninhabitable island.’⁴⁷ She has become ‘racornie comme du vieux cuir, intraitable comme la pierre’ (p. 246) [as tough as old leather, as inflexible as rock]. This final (symbolic) assimilation of the female protagonist to the rugged wilderness of the island seems to be performed through the re-naming of the latter ‘île de la Demoiselle’. The untamed wilderness and the animalised female body thus become one, in an act of inscription which questions traditional understanding of the (colonial) values of civilisation. Moreover, Anne Hébert also carries out a re-appropriation of Marguerite’s story on Canadian terms by re-writing it into a version which is very different from the original French one. She suggests an acceptance of the wilderness and of the powers of transformation it has to offer which definitely belongs to a contemporary vision informed by such discourses as that of the *américanité*, while her denunciation of women’s (oppressed) social status denotes a modern approach to the story which is absent from its sixteenth-century versions. In both plays, Anne Hébert addresses the difficulty in re-interpreting the past, and women’s past in particular. She raises questions as to the nature of history through

⁴⁶ Micheline Cambron, “‘La Cage’, suivi de ‘L’Île de la Demoiselle’”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 203.

⁴⁷ Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, ‘The Female Liminal Place, or Survival Between the Rock and the Hard Place: A Reading of Anne Hébert’s *L’Île de la Demoiselle*’, *Op. Cit.*, p. 192.

her use of the fairy tale form, and challenges Quebec's imagined narrative by telling the stories of Marguerite and Ludivine from the perspective of the oppressed female character. As a result, both heroines are given modern voices and invested with the power to control their destinies.

Conclusion

In *La Cage* and in *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, Anne Hébert denounces the oppressive patriarchal social structures which have governed and persecuted women's lives through the ages. Through her re-visiting and re-writing of the famous incident of *la Corriveau's* story, Hébert highlights the gender, class and cultural prejudices which repress the heroine and almost claim her life. *La Cage* shows indeed how a foreign Judge, a stranger to the land and its customs, has power of life and death over the rural Quebecois community. Crebessa's hostility towards the rough wilderness of the New World clearly symbolises his unfitness to rule the province, and is contrasted to Ludivine's harmonious and loving relationship with Nature. Moreover, Crebessa not only embodies the disruptive foreign conqueror but also the misogynistic social bias against women frequently encountered in this era. Crebessa is therefore the ultimate persecutor in the play, the embodiment of the sufferings inflicted upon the Quebecois people, and upon women, by the foreign patriarchal authority.

Similarly in *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, Hébert presents us with the tyrannical figure of Jean-François La Roque de Roberval and denounces the colonial nature of his desire to possess the heroine's body. He also pays the price of his life for unfairly victimising Marguerite, who emerges victorious, if altered, from her ordeal. Her relationship to the natural world is more testing than Ludivine's, but the potential for change it offers is also more rewarding: Marguerite reaches an 'animalised' state where she is stripped of the constraints of civilisation and liberated from its gender prejudices. Hébert thus succeeds in condemning the injustices of the past, while in *La Cage* she rehabilitates the character of *la Corriveau* by removing all the superstitious vilification she suffered in the years following her execution. Marie-Josephte's story has inspired the author with a play where 'literary imagination transforms the cultural heritage of Québec and frees it from the power of the Conquest and its masters, both past and present'.⁴⁸ In both plays, therefore, Hébert proves that artistic creation can alter the course of women's destinies.

⁴⁸ Maureen O'Meara, 'Living with the Cultural Legacy of La Corriveau: *La Cage*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 176.

Chapter Six:
***Le Premier jardin*, or Anne Hébert's Return to
the Origins of Quebec's 'Herstory'**

This chapter examines the process of historical re-interpretation at work in Anne Hébert's 1988 work *Le Premier jardin*. The novel tells the story of a return to origin which takes place on several different levels: to begin with, Flora Fontanges, a formerly successful actress living in France, goes back to her natal Quebec to return to the stage and to find her daughter Maud who has run away. We learn that Flora left Quebec City almost forty years previously to pursue an acting career in France and to escape from an unhappy life with a foster family. In parallel to Flora's reunion with her (private) past, the narrative also features an exploration of Quebec's (historical) past, and brings a sharp focus upon the roles played by the many anonymous and forgotten female characters which have been kept out of Quebec's historical records and have suffered gender and class related discrimination. These women's plights, and the unfair treatment they have received, are highlighted in the text in what becomes a powerful denunciation of the coercive social structures which have repressed women in the past.

Eventually, Flora has to confront the memories of the traumatic events of her childhood in order to achieve liberation from her oppressive past; only then is she able to find her daughter. As in the classical tragedies which the heroine plays on stage, the novel features Flora experiencing a form of catharsis: through the confrontation with the tragic fates of some of Quebec's female ancestors, she is able to come to terms with her own traumas, and to gain a more definite sense of her self, both as a woman and as an artist. This chapter will examine the ways in which the novel's re-visiting of the past allows the author to 're-write' the story of Quebec's origins in the face of its oppressive colonial legacy, before moving on to the elaboration of Quebec's 'herstory', and addressing the particular class, race and gender issues raised in the process. Finally, it will be shown how art and creative imagination become essential tools in the recognition of a Quebecois female 'martyrdom'.

Re-Interpreting Quebec's Postcolonial Past

Interestingly, although *Le Premier jardin* was first published in France, it seems to address a specifically Quebecois readership, or at least a readership well acquainted with Quebec and its history. For instance, the many episodes of Quebec's past mentioned in the story are only indirectly alluded to, with very few dates or famous historical names: the author relies heavily on her readers' knowledge of these episodes and implicitly expects them to understand her subdued historical references. Moreover, and quite significantly too, the novel is located in Quebec City, a place obviously loaded with historical and cultural meaning as it represents both the original site of the first permanent French settlement in the seventeenth century, and the place where the British defeated the French Canadians in the decisive battle of 1759. Today Quebec City is still the capital of the province of Quebec, and it is seen by many as a vital centre for the defence of Quebec's cultural heritage. The city thus seems a pertinent choice of location for a novel engaged in the process of exploring Quebecois history.

Rather surprisingly, however, the names 'Quebec' and 'Quebec City' are not mentioned once throughout the entire novel, although we do find numerous references to actual street names and local buildings, some of which, such as 'le parc des Champs-de-Bataille', are historically famous, but most are not known for any particular reason.¹ The reader is thus expected to have a fairly good knowledge of Quebec City in order to recognise its description and guess the location of the story. By not being directly mentioned once, the city seems to acquire a form of symbolic value in the text: Quebec City and its past history are posited as such obvious cultural 'objects' that there appears to be no need to introduce them to the outside reader. Contained within this attitude is also an element of self-legitimation through which the author shows a deliberate assumption that any reader will be familiar with the historical facts and locations her narrative draws upon, an attitude already encountered in such works as *Kamouraska* and *La Cage*, but also in Atwood's poem sequence. Besides, by only briefly alluding to these historical episodes and keeping them in the background of the story, Anne Hébert allows her heroine to develop her own interpretation of the 'facts' and her own historical voice – a technique reminiscent, here again, of Atwood's in *Alias Grace*, where the character of Mary Whitney is able to voice her (challenging) historical vision by inscribing it against the narrative's scarcity of references to well-known historical events.

The theme of return to the past is central to *Le Premier jardin*, and as said earlier, this exploration of past times is performed on two different levels: first of all, although the novel

¹ Anne Hébert, *Le Premier jardin* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1988), p. 41. All further references to the text will be from this edition.

was published in 1988, the story is set in 1976, in the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution, and this constitutes our first return to the past. The author is looking back at a period located more than ten years earlier, and this needs to be kept in mind when examining the ways in which she describes that period. It seems Anne Hébert is returning to the time of the Quiet Revolution in order to highlight the ways in which the historical and national discourses were initially formed, so as to better re-interpret these. Moreover, the narrative itself features a return to the past, through the character of Flora Fontanges, her return to the place where she grew up, and her obsession with finding her 'real' origins, as she was abandoned as a baby and has never met her natural parents. However, Flora's search for her origins seems to be displaced in the text, and transformed into a multitude of returns to the past: these cover the main scope of Quebec's history, from the first days of the French settlement, through the British conquest and up until the early twentieth century. Flora's ability to act and to play roles is conveniently used in this context, and becomes a means to 'revive' the past through embodying some of its long-dead characters. This feature of the novel also raises important issues as to the nature of history telling: the heroine's involvement with fictional narratives through her artistic career as an actress, together with her open attempts at re-living the past, and through this process re-creating it, underline the fact that any historical account is in fact a constructed narrative subjected to its narrator's point of view. By alternating her references to theatre roles with actual historical characters, Flora Fontanges seems to be putting both in parallel, which prompts the reader to question the authenticity of any 'official' historical report, while at the same time making allowance for other possible versions of the facts to be told.

As in *Kamouraska*, the heroine's use of the oral form in her attempts at re-visiting the past denotes a desire on the part of the author to challenge the traditional authority of the written historical form by replacing it with Flora's spontaneous and transient performances. Drawing from Emile Benveniste's work on speech act theories, critic Amy Reid points out that 'once uttered, a speech act cannot be repeated in its performative function', as its 'status shifts and it becomes, like a text, something that can be cited, something to which one can refer'.² Reid explains that, in the novel, when Flora speaks as Barbe Abbadie, one of the numerous female characters she embodies, and says 'Je suis Barbe Abbadie' (p. 52), she 'not only performs the action of defining self but also creates a speech/text that authenticates that

² Amy Reid, 'The Textual Grounding of *Québécoises* Identity: *Le Premier jardin* and *Kamouraska*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, edited by Janis L. Pallister (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), p. 281.

identity'.³ Reid concludes that '[b]y giving voice to a woman previously erased from history, Flora creates a text that allows others to reference that performative utterance in their construction of *québécoise* identity'.⁴ It is also interesting to note that it is the heroine who creates the 'text', while being accompanied through her process of past exploration by the character of Raphaël, her daughter's lover, and a history student. The conventional roles thus seem to have been reversed, as the male historian, traditionally a source of authority, turns to the female artist in order to recover the missing gaps of the official version.⁵

The novel's essential theme of a return to origin is also expressed in the wider sense of the term: the title *Le Premier jardin* suggests the idea of an original garden, which becomes a central metaphor in the story for both Flora's childhood, and the birth of the Quebecois community as a whole, at the time when the colony was only an early settlement. This latter use of the metaphor proves particularly significant in the analysis of the historical re-reading process taking place in the narrative. Flora is said to be 'saisie par ce commencement des temps qu'il y eut dans la ville' (p. 78) [struck by the early days of the city],⁶ and chooses to develop her own version of Quebec's myth of origin. This attitude is well in keeping with the artistic inspiration of 1960s Quebec, but also reminds one of Albert Memmi's claims that, in order to achieve self-liberation, the colonised people elaborates a 'counter-mythology', by which the negative myth imposed by the coloniser is replaced by a positive myth, proposed by the colonised.⁷ It will be shown how Flora's re-appropriation of Quebec's myth of origin strives to perform a double distancing from the racial, but also gender, stereotypes which have dominated Quebec's past.

In her version of Quebec's origins, the heroine insists especially on the role played by the wilderness by showing how the settlers' systems of belief were challenged. Flora's description of their first contact with the land is particularly telling:

³ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281. Emphasis in the original text. In this context, Judith Butler's notion of performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the power to enact what it names, also proves useful when examining Flora's verbal attempts at re-creating the past. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, New York, 1990), p. 145.

⁵ One notices in particular Raphaël's almost antiquarian approach to history in the way he recites collections of dates and facts; Flora, on the other hand, centres her (re-)creation of the past on the need for experiencing it through empathy.

⁶ Anne Hébert, *The First Garden* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1990), p. 61. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to the text in English will be from Sheila Fischman's translation, in this edition.

⁷ Jaap Lintvelt, 'La Recherche historique et identitaire dans *Le Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Culture et colonisation en Amérique du Nord: Canada, États-Unis, Mexique*, edited by Jaap Lintvelt, Réal Ouellet and Hub Hermans (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1994), p. 286, quoting from Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 153.

Il y eut mille jours et il y eut mille nuits, et c'était la forêt, encore mille jours et mille nuits, et c'était toujours la forêt, de grands pans de pins et de chênes dévalaient le cap, jusqu'au fleuve, et la montagne était derrière, [...] couverte d'arbres aussi. On en finissait pas d'accumuler les jours et les nuits dans la sauvagerie de la terre. (p. 76)

[A thousand days had passed, and a thousand nights, and there was forest, another thousand days and thousand nights, and there was still the forest, great sweeps of pine and oak hurtling down the headland to the river, and the mountain was behind, [...] covered with trees as well. There was an unending accumulation of days and nights in the wildness of the earth. (p. 59)]

This extract vividly illustrates the feeling of utter powerlessness which must have overwhelmed the first explorers sailing up the St Lawrence River. They were then confronted by Nature in its most commanding and 'uncivilised' state. Flora's insistence on the large number of days and nights spent travelling through the forest, if not entirely realistic, does emphasise the superiority of the wilderness in showing how man's scale of time is reduced to nothing when matched to Nature's magnitude. She seems to be implying that the systems of knowledge the settlers are bringing with them will be inadequate for the new land, and represents them as being challenged by this world where another order of things appears to be at work, suggesting perhaps that new systems of belief will have to be set in place, an idea very reminiscent of Susanna Moodie's own vision. The dichotomy between Nature and civilisation hinted at here is developed further on through the idea of the creation of a garden:

Est-ce donc si difficile de faire un jardin, en pleine forêt, et de l'entourer d'une palissade comme un trésor? [...] Des carottes, des salades, des poireaux, des choux bien alignés, en rangs serrés, tirés au cordeau, parmi la sauvagerie de la terre tout alentour. (pp. 76-77)

[Is it so difficult then to make a garden in the middle of the forest, and to surround it with a palisade like a treasure-trove? [...] Carrots, lettuces, leeks, cabbages, all in a straight line, in serried ranks along a taut cord, amid the wild earth all around. (pp. 59-60)]

The clear contrast in this passage between the organised structure of the garden and the wilderness surrounding it can be seen as representative of man's own relationship to the wild land. The building of the palisade in particular seems to allude to the symbolic delimitation man needs between himself and the wilderness, as a way of protecting himself against what he judges uncivilised and alien. The zeal described in the neat construction of this garden can

also be related to the need to preserve one's initial set of values. In this context, it is not surprising Flora should add that:

Ils ont semé le premier jardin avec des graines qui venaient de France. Ils ont dessiné le jardin d'après cette idée de jardin, ce souvenir de jardin, dans leur tête, et ça ressemblait à s'y méprendre à un jardin de France, jeté dans la forêt du Nouveau Monde. (p. 76)

[They sowed the first garden with seeds that came from France. They laid out the garden according to the notion of a garden, the memory of a garden, that they carried in their heads, and it was almost indistinguishable from a garden in France, flung into a forest in the New World. (pp. 59-60)]

Words such as 'dessiné', 'idée', 'souvenir' and 'tête' emphasise the thinking process involved in the conceptualisation first, and then the realisation of this garden. Flora implicitly links this process to the settlers' deliberate attempt at maintaining and reproducing the ways of the mother country. France plays the role of a safe model to follow when one is faced with change and isolation. However, Flora also makes allowance for the procedures of adaptation, innovation and differentiation which took place over the years:

Les enfants et les petits-enfants, à leur tour, ont refait des jardins, à l'image du premier jardin, se servant de graines issues de la terre nouvelle. Peu à peu, à mesure que les générations passaient, l'image mère s'est effacée dans les mémoires. Ils ont arrangé les jardins à leur idée et à l'idée du pays auquel ils ressemblaient de plus en plus. (p. 77)

[The children and grandchildren in their turn remade the gardens in the image of the first one, using seeds that the new earth had yielded. Little by little, as generations passed, the mother image has been erased from their memories. They have arranged the gardens to match their own ideas and to match the idea of the country they come more and more to resemble. (p. 60)]

The adaptation to the New World is described here as a smooth process in which the systems of values the colonisers initially brought with them are progressively transformed through their contact with their new environment. These transformations seem to eventually lead to the settlers' 'reconciliation' with their alien new world, as suggested in the extract by the use of seeds from the new land. But the fact that they are also said to gradually 'resemble' more and more their new surroundings implies both the settlers' integration into the latter and their progressive differentiation from the mother country. The heroine's terms in this extract are reminiscent of the discourse of *américanité*, with its rapprochement to the continent and

acceptance of the potential for change that came with it. This rapprochement, however, is at the expense of the mother country, which Flora describes as increasingly fading out of people's memories. But the concept of *américanité* also contains an idea of emancipation and increased liberty, as suggested in the extract by the descendants of the settlers building their gardens according to their own fancy. This can be seen as a metaphor for the possibilities for change and innovation the *américanité* associates with the New World. Moreover, the discourse of *américanité* began to be heard during the Quiet Revolution in Quebec – it is thus not surprising that the protagonist of a novel set in 1976 should be influenced by the concept. However, the traditional idea that Quebec's previously strong allegiance to its mother country had had an inhibiting and repressing effect on its cultural development seems to be laid aside in the narrative. Flora describes instead a progressive and harmonious process towards independence, thus modifying and moderating the claims of the Quiet Revolution in the light of more recent ideas.

As mentioned earlier, the novel shows a particular concern with the writing, or re-writing, of a myth of origin for Quebec. The theme of 'the first garden' allows Flora to draw a parallel with another original garden from which mankind was born: the Garden of Eden. She uses and re-writes the myth of Adam and Eve in order to tell the story of the birth of the Quebecois community:

Le premier homme s'appelait Louis Hébert et la première femme, Marie Rollet. Ils ont semé le premier jardin [...]

Quand le pommier, ramené [...] et transplanté, a enfin donné ses fruits, c'est devenu le premier de tous les jardins du monde, avec Adam et Ève devant le pommier. Toute l'histoire du monde s'est mise à recommencer à cause d'un homme et d'une femme plantés en terre nouvelle. (pp. 76-77)

[The first man was called Louis Hébert, the first woman Marie Rollet. They sowed the first garden [...]

When the apple tree brought here [...] and transplanted finally yielded its fruit, it became the first of all the gardens in the world, with Adam and Eve standing before the Tree. The whole history of the world was starting afresh because of a man and a woman planted in this new earth. (pp. 59-60)]

Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet, the seventeenth-century settlers who allegedly founded the city of Quebec, here replace Adam and Eve, the only inhabitants of the Garden of Eden. But instead of enjoying an original state of Nature, as in Eden, Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet are described as building the first garden and planting the apple tree themselves. Unlike the Garden of Eden where man was required not to intervene, the settlement on the new continent

is clearly presented as the result of a willing decision and intense effort on the part of its early settlers. There seems to be a contrast here between passive and active myths of origin, and a form of pride in the fact that Quebec's story is definitely an active one. The birth of the Quebecois community appears to be described as the result of an inscribed manifest destiny on the new continent, and the process of self-assertion contained within this attitude is reminiscent, once again, of the national claims of the Quiet Revolution.

One can also perhaps see in the author's mention of 'Marie Rollet', one of her own ancestresses, a wish to emphasise the novel's intertwining of private and official past, a technique already performed through the heroine's exploration of Quebec's past, in which she introduces some of her own childhood memories.⁸ This legitimisation of what belongs to the realm of the private, but nevertheless infiltrates the domain of official history, echoes Elisabeth's 'history' in *Kamouraska* and expresses a trope familiar in Hébert's work: the valorisation of women's private visions and records, through which their forgotten lives are allowed to be recognised. Moreover, the use of an actual ancestress in the elaboration of women's 'herstory' is a theme recurrent in both Atwood's and Hébert's writings, as seen earlier, and which seems to illustrate both authors' will to inscribe their own past among the multitude of anonymous and forgotten female lives which have been kept out of history's records.

Érick Falardeau points out how in *Le Premier jardin* national memory is evoked through one of the great 'mythes fondateurs de la nation canadienne-française' [founding myths of the French Canadian nation]: the arrival of Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet.⁹ However he insists that the biblical imagery of the Garden of Eden chosen by Hébert implies that the original sin must be equated with the English Conquest, responsible for the frustration of the Quebecois people.¹⁰ Falardeau adds that this dialectic of 'premier jardin/jardin entaché' [first garden/garden sullied] resonates like a repudiation of the English presence and influence in *Nouvelle France*.¹¹ One may find this reading slightly surprising as references to the English Conquest in the novel are scarce: Hébert does not dwell upon the events of the British colonisation in *Nouvelle France*, and there is no mention in the text of an 'original sin' having been committed, or of the 'original garden' having been sullied by some later

⁸ Anne Hébert confirmed in a radio interview that Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet were her ancestors, and that after their arrival in Canada in 1617, they sowed and harvested the very first wheat sheaf of the colony. Interview featured in the radio show 'Radioscopie', presented by Jacques Chancel and broadcast on France Inter in 1977.

⁹ Érick Falardeau, 'Fictionalisation de l'histoire, *Le Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 22, n° 3, 1997), p. 561. My translation.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 562.

intervention. It seems, on the contrary, that her re-writing of the myth of Adam and Eve aims at evening out the traditional gender and race divisions which the biblical story has produced in the past. As Jacqueline Ferry points out, 'Ève ne rencontre aucun serpent dans ce nouveau jardin' [Eve does not encounter any serpent in this new garden], while she adds that Hébert's version of the mythical story emphasises how Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet re-created the New World together, as equals, with no indication that one of the two might have been 'created' before the other, and thus might have been superior to the other.¹²

Falardeau also observes that Flora's rejection of her (unhappy) childhood memories is associated in the novel with the fact that her adoptive family, the Eventurels, have the typical anglophile characteristics of some of the French Canadian bourgeoisie of the time.¹³ Falardeau adds that their 'servile' attachment to the Anglophone heritage is depicted in a negative way in the text through the use of irony. Indeed, Flora remembers mockingly the Eventurels' wish to dress her with a 'jupe écossaise de chez Renfrew, aux authentiques couleurs des clans écossais' [kilt from Holt Renfrew made of genuine Scottish tartan], or their claim that '[t]out ce qui est écossais ou anglais d'ailleurs est très bien' [whatever is Scottish or English is entirely acceptable].¹⁴ Falardeau accurately underlines the novel's satire of the anglophile Quebecois bourgeoisie, a theme already encountered in *Kamouraska*. Significantly, however, the admiration of British values is held by Quebecois characters in the novel, and thus, if anything, the author seems to be condemning Quebec's appropriation of the coloniser's foreign ideals and repression of a Quebecois identity and lifestyle, rather than the arrival of the foreign colonials itself. Once again, it seems Hébert is highlighting the role played by Quebec itself in the victimisation of some of its own citizens.

The author also allows another version of the myth of origin to be heard and another form of historical re-interpretation to take place. Through the character of Céleste, a Quebecois student in her twenties, the reader is given a version of the facts which takes into account Canada's very first inhabitants. Céleste's recognition of the important role played by the Natives is in keeping with a current of thought which was not prominent during the Quiet Revolution, but became so in later years. She declares indeed that 'cette histoire inventée par [...] Flora Fontanges au sujet des fondateurs de la ville [est] fausse et tendancieuse' (p. 79) [this whole story [...] Flora Fontanges [has] made up about the city's founders [is] phoney

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 562. My translation.

¹² Jacqueline Ferry, 'Du Premier jardin au jardin des délices terrestres', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* (n° 80, 1993), p. 25. My translation.

¹³ Erick Falardeau, *Op. Cit.*, p. 565.

and slanted (p. 62)]. Céleste seems to be denouncing the fact that Flora's tale overlooks other possible perspectives of the events. She then proceeds to give her own version of the 'facts', going back to what she considers the true moment of origin – before the arrival of the Europeans:

- Le premier homme et la première femme de ce pays avaient le teint cuivré et des plumes dans les cheveux. Quant au premier jardin, il n'avait ni queue ni tête, il y poussait en vrac du blé d'Inde et des patates. Le premier regard humain posé sur le monde, c'était un regard d'Amérindien, et c'est ainsi qu'il a vu venir les Blancs sur le fleuve, sur de grands bateaux [...] bourrés de fusils, de canons, d'eau bénite et d'eau-de-vie. (p. 79)

[“The first man and the first woman in this country had copper-coloured skin and wore feathers in their hair. As for the first garden, there was no beginning or end, just a tangled mass of corn and potatoes. The first human gaze that lit on the world was the gaze of an Amerindian, and that was how he saw the Whites coming down the river, on big ships [...] crammed with rifles and cannons, with holy water and fire water.” (p. 62)]

We find here again undertones of the myth of Adam and Eve, with Céleste's use of expressions such as 'premier homme' and 'première femme'. This helps underline the fact that the Natives were the true 'original' inhabitants of Canada, the same way Adam and Eve were those of the Garden of Eden. Céleste also gives an interesting counterpart to Flora's 'first garden', and through this she seems to want to do away with the traditional opposition between Nature and civilisation. Céleste's garden appears indeed to be an alternative to both: it is described as having 'ni queue ni tête', but still provides edible food ('blé d'Inde', 'patates') and thus comes to represent a valuable source of nourishment for the Natives. Therefore, although it is not the well-structured garden of the European settlers, there is still some sort of sense and meaning to that garden. Her repetitive use of the word 'premier' in the extract also indicates an attempt to emphasise the anteriority of the Natives in relation to the Europeans, thus establishing the legitimacy of their presence on the land. In particular, Céleste's allusion to the fact that the Natives were the first to behold the world surrounding them suggests that they are the ones who somehow granted reality to that world.

Similarly, we find an interesting 'return of the gaze' in Céleste's version: traditionally, most of the early representations of the Natives have come from European settlers' accounts. Their perspective on the events of the colonisation is also usually the only perspective taken

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 565, quoting from Anne Hébert, *Le Premier jardin*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 136. Translation from Anne Hébert, *The First Garden*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 112.

into consideration. But in the extract we witness the arrival of the Whites through the eyes of the Native, and the process of 'objectification' inherent in this act of looking is thus reversed. It is the European who becomes the threatening 'other', and the description of his ship's cargo is definitely not reassuring: on the contrary, it aims at underlining his clearly colonial intentions, and at showing the different levels on which colonisation took place. The reference to the holy water, for instance, alludes to the religious missionaries who came first, before the actual conquest of the land was performed with the help of 'guns' and 'cannons', while the 'eau de vie' reminds one of the sad consequences which resulted from the Natives' first contact with alcohol. Ironically, however, Céleste's enumeration juxtaposes the 'eau bénite' and the 'eau-de-vie', and the repetition of the word 'eau' carries out a rapprochement between both expressions. Céleste appears to be suggesting that there might be some similarities between the (negative) effects of alcohol and those of religious conversion. But although her character is very assertive, she only plays a minor role in the novel, and her version of the facts, which she gives only on this occasion, is kept in the background of the story. As a result, Céleste's defence of the Native cause seems to be as subdued as was its actual counterpart taking place in 1960s Quebec, and her point of view remains a dissident voice on the margins of the novel's central narrative.¹⁵

Through the novel's focus upon the local, in terms of the events, characters and locations making up the history of Quebec, the author is able to legitimise – and celebrate – Quebec's past and origins. The rather romantic vision she gives of the founding of the Quebecois nation is however counterbalanced by the introduction of the Native point of view, which illustrates the evolution of historical narratives through time: the new Quebecois generation, through Céleste, presents here a vision which challenges that of former generations.¹⁶ Flora also transcends the racial and class related divisions which have traditionally decided who and what should be included, or remain absent, from historical accounts, while her engagement with the fictional form, through her dramatic art, helps highlight the constructed nature of all historical narratives. The next section shows how, through the choice of an actress for central heroine, Hébert manages to include in her version

¹⁵ However, the virulence of the character of Céleste, when present in the story, and her insistence on occupying a central space, and, inadvertently, Flora's hotel room, could be seen as compelling reminders of the beliefs she stands for, without the need for further reiterating them.

¹⁶ In this respect, the character of Éric and his 'commune' seem to illustrate another process of historical 're-writing' taking place in the novel, while also raising questions as to what extent can one create a new Eden, and through this, start a new history? Éric and his followers seem indeed to be consciously aware of their attempt at establishing a new beginning, another 'premier jardin', in the form of the 'cité de paix dont ils rêvent' (p. 58) [peaceful city of their dreams]. My translation.

of Quebec's history many of the forgotten female actors who have played a part in Quebec's past, but who have been excluded from its historical records.

The Origins of Quebec's 'Herstory'

As said earlier, the novel's fictional returns to the past can be seen as attempts to re-write and redefine Quebec's past: Mary Jean Green points out that 'Hébert's work expands the traditional vision of Quebec history to make room for the difference of gender.'¹⁷ She adds that '*Le Premier jardin* is a prime example of what Linda Hutcheon would call the post-modern form of historiographic metafiction, as it intertwines personal and cultural history through a focus on the lives of women.'¹⁸ Flora's exploration of bygone times focuses indeed mainly on female characters, and in particular on the anonymous and long-dead women whom she sees as having played a crucial part in Quebecois history. She aims at denouncing the various forms of injustice these women have suffered, the most obvious one being to have been kept out of history and condemned to silence. This is what prompts Flora to bring them back to life by momentarily playing their role, and by thus empathising with these unknown women, Flora creates a space for them in history:

Ils ont appelé des créatures disparues, les tirant par leur nom, comme avec une corde du fond d'un puits, pour qu'elles viennent saluer sur la scène et se nommer bien haut, afin qu'on les reconnaisse et leur rende hommage, avant qu'elles ne disparaissent à nouveau. D'obscurs héroïnes de l'histoire sont ainsi nées et mortes à la suite les unes des autres. (p. 120)

[They have summoned creatures now disappeared, drawing them out by their names, as with a rope from the bottom of a well, to bring them on stage, bowing and speaking their names aloud so they may be recognized and acknowledged before disappearing again. In this way do obscure heroines of history come to life and then die, one by one. (p. 98)]

The recurrence in the text of words such as 'nom', 'appeler', and 'nommer' helps suggest that the act of 'naming' is essential to the novel's process of looking back at the past in order to recognise and give merit to its unknown victims. In this context, Green notes that, as 'she had previously done in *Kamouraska*, Anne Hébert opens the archives of Quebec City to unearth women banned from traditional history and to question the heroic myths of historically based

¹⁷ Mary Jean Green, 'The Quebec Novel Today: Multiple Perspectives', *The French Review* (Vol. 67, n° 6, 1994), p. 924.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 924.

Quebec identity.’¹⁹ We get a vivid illustration of this ‘archival unearthing’ halfway through the novel, where a long enumeration of unknown female names stands out from the text:

Flora Fontanges [a] commencé à réciter les noms des filles du Roi, comme une litanie de saintes, ces noms qui sont à jamais enfouis dans des archives poussiéreuses.

Graton, Mathurine
Gruau, Jeanne
Guerrière, Marie-Bonne
Hallier, Perette
d’Orange, Barbe
Drouet, Catherine
de la Fitte, Apolline (p. 99)

[Flora Fontanges [has] started to recite the names of the King’s girls, the *filles du Roi*, like a litany of saints, names hidden away in dusty archives forever.

Graton, Mathurine
Gruau, Jeanne
Guerrière, Marie-Bonne
Hallier, Perette
d’Orange, Barbe
Drouet, Catherine
de la Fitte, Apolline (p. 78)]

As said earlier, very few historical names are given throughout the novel, be it the name of a person, a place or an event; but this list forces the reader to pay attention to these names and to think about these forgotten women. The latter, who are usually referred to as the *filles du Roi*, played an important role in an episode of Quebec history which is often overlooked: in the first part of the seventeenth century, the colony of *Nouvelle France* was composed mostly of men, either soldiers or fur-traders, and among the minority of women many were nuns. The population was remaining small, and it was feared that the settlement might not survive or might be taken over by the enemy. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure the future of the colony, and to make sure it would develop into a powerful nation, Louis XIV sent almost a thousand young French women as brides-to-be to *Nouvelle France*. The King paid for their trip and provided them with dowries, which is the reason why these women came to be known as the *filles du Roi*, although they did not have any formal link with the nobility. On the contrary, they were from very modest social backgrounds, and their actual origins have been the subject of much historical speculation. A number of historians have suspected these

¹⁹ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 123.

women to be former inmates from some of Paris's mental institutions and prisons. The official version, on the other hand, always maintained that these women were French peasants, very poor but of an irreproachable morality. There was a particular insistence on this latter feature of morality as a way to counter-balance the stereotype of the French Canadian as the inferior descendant of his French ancestors. In such a context, it is indeed crucial to assert one's spotless origins. But Flora seems to want to do away with these historical disputes about social class and origin; she casually tells the reader:

La Nouvelle France a mauvaise réputation en métropole. On parle d'un *lieu d'horreur* et des *faubourgs de l'enfer*. Les paysannes se font tirer l'oreille. Il a bien fallu avoir recours à La Salpêtrière pour peupler la colonie. (p. 96)

[New France has a bad reputation in the mother country. People speak of a 'place of horror' and of the 'suburbs of hell'. Peasant women need coaxing. They have to turn to the Salpêtrière, that home for former prostitutes, to populate the colony. (p. 75)]

What Flora appears to be pointing out is the immense courage these women showed when they did agree to leave their homeland, as they then faced an uncertain future in a distant place where the conditions of life were rumoured to be particularly hard. It hardly matters where these women actually came from, Flora seems to be saying, they should instead be remembered for their heroic action, and this regardless of their social background. She also hints at the fact that, without these women, there might not have been a Quebecois community today:

Un jour, notre mère [...] s'est embarquée sur un grand voilier, traversant l'océan, durant de longs mois, pour venir vers nous qui n'existions pas encore, pour nous sortir du néant et de l'odeur de la terre en friche. (p. 100)

[One day our mother [...] embarked on a great sailing ship, travelled across the ocean for long months, making her way to us who did not yet exist, to bring us out of nothing, out of the scent of a barren land. (p. 79)]

Flora thus places a very strong emphasis on the important role these women have played in the settlement of the New World. But there is another aspect of this historical episode which Flora is trying to denounce: the purely material interest the colonial authorities of the time had in these women. Flora points out indeed that within two weeks of their arrival in the colony they were expected to get married, and she understands this as a strong encouragement for the women to rapidly have children. Flora imagines the officials of the time referring to the *filles*

du Roi in terms of ‘jeunes corps voués sans réserve à l’homme, au travail et à la maternité’ (p. 96) [young bodies dedicated unreservedly to man, to work, and to motherhood (p. 75)]. No personal will or power of decision seems to be granted to them, while Flora emphasises that their physical abilities, and in particular their ‘reproductive’ function, appear to be their main value:

Ils sont tous là sur le rivage, en attente des bateaux venant de France.
[...]

Cette fois-ci, il ne s’agit pas seulement de farine et de sucre, de lapins, de coqs et de poules, de vaches et de chevaux, de pichets d’étain et de couteaux à manche de corne, de pièces de draps et d’étamine, d’outils et de coton à fromage, c’est d’une cargaison de filles à marier, *aptés à la génération* dont il est bel et bien question. (pp. 95-96, emphasis mine)

[They are all there on the shore, waiting for the ships from France. [...]

This time it’s not just flour and sugar, rabbits, roosters, and hens, cows and horses, pewter jugs and horn-handled knives, lengths of wool and muslin, tools and cheese-cloth: this is a cargo of marriageable girls, *suited for reproduction*, which is the matter at hand. (pp. 74-75, emphasis mine)]

The long enumeration of the different types of food, commodities and animals which precede the actual reference to the women aims at placing them at the same level as the rest of the ship’s cargo. Flora wants to illustrate her belief that, at the time, these women were seen as one among many commodities. It is also important to note that the merchandise mentioned is not even precious or rare: it is after a long list of basic goods and farm animals that Flora locates the *filles du Roi*. Through this, and her use of the expression ‘cargaison de filles à marier’, she denounces the colonial authorities’ mercantile attitude towards the female newcomers. Moreover, words such as ‘aptés à la génération’ illustrate what she sees as the officials’ almost crude interest in the women’s ability to have children. This also suggests that motherhood was a duty or even an obligation, an idea well in keeping with the concept of the *revanche des berceaux* which would also be key in ‘saving’ the Quebecois nation after the failed Rebellions of 1837-38. Through Flora, the author seems to be denouncing the coercive practices which have governed women’s lives in the past. She once again focuses especially on the type of oppression Quebec imposed upon its own female citizens. Hébert also seems to want to rehabilitate these female ancestors, and to cast a new and modern perspective on their anonymous and often tragic lives: she is truly engaged in the process of establishing a Quebecois ‘herstory’.

The heroine's re-visiting of women's past does not however only revolve around the early times of the colony. Flora also ponders over the social class divisions of nineteenth-century French Canada, which have meant that a whole section of the female population has been excluded from historical records: the servant class. She describes how the '[f]emmes de chambre, cuisinières, bonnes d'enfants, bonnes à tout faire [...] ont tenu à bout de bras des rues entières, intactes et fraîches' (p. 115) [[c]hambermaids, cooks, nannies, general help, at arms' length [...] have kept whole streets intact and fresh (p. 93)]. Flora highlights the importance of the servant class by showing how the hard work they carried out behind closed doors had positive and visible effects on the outside as well ('rues entières, intactes et fraîches'). She further illustrates the crucial roles played by these maids:

elles ont lavé, essuyé, briqué, encaustiqué, épluché, bouilli et rôti, frit et rissolé, débarbouillé et bercé, consolé et soigné les enfants et les malades, montant et descendant, jour après jour, trois ou quatre étages, de la cave au grenier.

Depuis qu'elles ne sont plus là, ayant disparu peu à peu, au cours des années, on a dû abandonner les grandes maisons incommodes, tout en étages, impossibles à conserver sans elles. (p. 116)

[they washed, dried, scrubbed, waxed, plucked, boiled and roasted, fried and browned, wiped and rocked, consoled and cared for children and the sick, climbing up and down, day after day, three or four sets of stairs, from cellar to attic.

Now that they have gone, having disappeared little by little over the years, the great, inconvenient houses with all their storeys, impossible to maintain without them, have had to be abandoned. (p. 94)]

The fast succession of verbs renders accurately the relentless and wide-ranging series of tasks the servants used to perform. Without them, however, a certain way of life and a certain comfort have become impossible, as implied in the extract. It is also suggested that the bourgeoisie could not have inhabited their own homes without the help of their maids, thus going against the common nineteenth-century idea that servants were being given a 'roof over their heads' when joining a particular household. Anne Hébert develops here a theme which was also encountered in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: according to Mary Whitney, 'although rich', their masters are 'feeble and ignorant creatures', unable to take proper care of themselves if it was not for the help of the servants.²⁰ Hébert, like Atwood, seems to be speaking for the recognition of the servant class without whom, she claims, the life of the elite would have been impossible. It is however the life and thoughts of the elite which have

²⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 182.

traditionally been recorded in historical writings: both authors thus attempt to underline the basic injustice which has kept the lower classes silent and absent from historical records, in spite of their important social roles.

The non-recognition of the maids' essential roles is also associated in *Le Premier jardin* with the denunciation of the 'loss of name' they were subjected to:

Des femmes perdaient leur nom en rentrant en ville [...]. Elles ne gardaient plus que leur prénom qu'il fallait parfois changer, afin d'éviter toute confusion avec celui de Madame ou de Mademoiselle, dans la maison où elles entraient comme domestiques. (p. 116)

[Some women lost their family names by returning to the city (sic) [...]. They retained only their Christian names, sometimes changing even these to avoid confusion with the name of Madame or Mademoiselle, in the households which they joined as servants. (p. 94)]

The description of this practice which was current in the nineteenth century emphasises the maids' non-existent social status at the time. In the text, losing one's name is linked to losing one's sense of self and individuality; it comes to be seen as the ultimate denial of a person's being. *Le Premier jardin* further develops this idea with the suggestion that women's lack of freedom and persecution in earlier ages can be symbolised by this 'loss of name'. The heroine reinforces her criticism of the strict social and religious conventions which she sees as having oppressed women in the past with the example of Guillemette Thibault, a young woman who wanted to 'take over from her father at the forge' where he was blacksmith (p. 69). Despite showing real talent for ironwork, Guillemette was eventually forced to join the convent:

Guillemette Thibault, c'est un beau nom à porter toute sa vie, sans jamais en changer pour le nom d'un étranger qui la prendrait pour femme. [...]
Mariage ou couvent, pour une fille, il n'y a pas d'autre issue. [...]

Ce qu'elle craignait plus que tout au monde, qu'on lui prenne son nom, est arrivé par la suite. Après deux ans de noviciat, elle est devenue sœur Agnès-de-la-Pitié, et on n'a plus jamais entendu parler de Guillemette Thibault. (p. 87)

[Guillemette Thibault is a fine name, one to bear all one's life, never to change for the name of some stranger who would take her as his wife. [...]
Marriage or the convent: for a girl there's no other way out. [...]

What she feared most in the world, that her name be taken from her, subsequently came to pass. After two years of novitiate, she became Sister Agnès-de-la-Pitié and no one ever heard of Guillemette Thibault again. (p. 69)]

Guillemette's loss of name powerfully illustrates the restrictions of women's roles in the past and highlights the fact that her gifts and ambitions greatly exceeded the options available to her. The suppression of her sense of self and the process of social alienation which ensue are blamed upon society and the Church: the loss of identity through marriage, a theme also encountered in *Kamouraska* and *La Cage*, is here paired with the denunciation of the conformity enforced by religion.

The importance of one's name in the assertion of one's sense of self is further illustrated by the fact that when Flora was abandoned as a baby, her parents did not leave any indication of her name. She was placed in an orphanage where nuns took care of her and called her Pierrette Paul, only because she was found on St Pierre's and St Paul's feast day. She then had to give up this name when she was adopted by the Eventurel family who re-named her Marie. Eventually, when she left Quebec at the age of eighteen, she rejected her adoptive name and chose to call herself Flora Fontanges. This last choice seems to have been motivated by the need to escape from the social rejection she was victim of in her hometown: the novel's depiction of early twentieth-century Quebec emphasises indeed the importance which is given to tradition and family origins. In such a context, it is not surprising that the heroine should have felt marginalized for having been anonymously abandoned as a baby. Moreover, critic Alessandra Ferraro finds the theme of abandonment to be predominant in the novel, as the events dealing with Quebec's national past and those of the life of the heroine both constitute two parallel narratives which are similarly marked by a sense of lack of origins and of painful abandonment.²¹ Ferraro notes that, as with Flora's birth, 'la venue au monde [du Québec] n'a été qu'un malentendu'²² [the birth of [Quebec] was only a misunderstanding].²³ Ferraro concludes that Flora and her community are both haunted by a feeling of abandonment, of lack of identity and of absence of root. Behind the many women's names which Flora pronounces and, consequently, takes out of archival oblivion, Ferraro sees an attempt to fill up an original emptiness by searching for the single woman 'Pierrette-Marie-Flora' has never known: her natural mother.²⁴

Flora's successive names thus seem to symbolise the social alienation she experienced in her childhood, while her need to take possession of her life on her own terms is illustrated

²¹ Alessandra Ferraro, 'Le Rôle de l'Histoire dans *Le Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Anne Hébert, parcours d'une œuvre: Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne*, edited by Madeleine Ducrocq-Poirier (L'Hexagone, Montreal, 1997), p. 375.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 377, quoting from Anne Hébert, *Le Premier jardin*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 55.

²³ My translation.

by her choosing her own identity. It is also suggested in the text that Flora's decision to run away from her foster family might have been prompted by their wish to impose an arranged marriage on her, where social class, and not love, would have determined the choice of the suitor. Once again, Hébert depicts marriage as a possible threat to the assertion of women's identity, and in this context, Flora's decision to become an actress is particularly significant in that it allows her to embrace a multitude of different identities, to go beyond herself, and to transcend the restricted life her adoptive parents had in mind for her:

Son désir le plus profond était d'habiter ailleurs qu'en elle-même [...]
Éclater en dix, cent, mille fragments vivaces; être dix, cent, mille personnes
nouvelles et vivaces. (pp. 63-64)

[Her deepest desire was to live in some other place than within herself [...]
To shatter into ten, a hundred, a thousand indestructible fragments; to be ten, a
hundred, a thousand new and indestructible persons. (pp. 46-47)]

The return to her home-place, however, has a cathartic effect for her, as she is forced to face the rejection she experienced in her childhood, to overcome her past, and to accept her marginality. Eventually, the multitude of female characters in the novel, from a diversity of time periods, social class and backgrounds, are condensed into a whole and transcended by an ultimate symbol of femininity:

En réalité, c'est d'elle seule qu'il s'agit, la reine aux mille noms, la
première fleur, la première racine, Ève en personne [...] fragmentée en mille
frais visages, Ève dans toute sa verdeur multipliée [...]
Tour à tour blonde, brune ou rousse, riant et pleurant à la fois, c'est elle, notre
mère (pp. 99-100)

[In reality, it concerns her alone, the queen with a thousand names, the
first flower, first root, Eve in person [...] fragmented now into a thousand fresh
faces, Eve in her manifold greenness [...]
In turn blonde, brunette, or auburn, laughing and crying at once, it is she, our
mother (pp. 78-79)]

The figure of Eve is used here as a powerful celebration of women, but in choosing a biblical character whose status has always been controversial within religious conventions, the author seems to be adopting an unusual approach. Eve is usually held responsible for the fall of mankind and seen as a source of sinful temptation. She has also traditionally represented 'women' in the wider sense of the term, therefore associating them to what became perceived

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

as gender related faults. Anne Hébert, however, embraces the mythical figure in its totality, and thus confronts the patriarchal prejudice typically associated with her. In the novel, Eve becomes a compelling symbol and a source of empowerment for all women who have been unjustly persecuted: as seen earlier, Hébert's – and Atwood's – use of a potentially malevolent female archetype serves to denounce patriarchal oppression and to encourage women's resistance to it. As Mary Jean Green observes, 'women's future can develop only on the basis of a new understanding of the past',²⁵ thus emphasising the importance of revealing women's oppressed past, so as to create new opportunities for them in the future. Jacqueline Ferry adds that the character of Eve in *Le Premier jardin* is not the source of mankind's misfortunes anymore, and nor does she pass on any sense of guilt to her daughters. Ferry points out that Hébert has re-valorised the mythical character and replaced her cult (Eve's) to that of Mary, virgin and mother, who has traditionally imposed contradictory and unrealisable demands upon women. Ferry concludes that in the novel, Eve comes to illustrate the importance of women's 'non-History', which must come to complete (men's) History.²⁶

Female Artist and Women Martyrs

The novel's focus on the many women who have suffered social and historical exclusion throughout Quebec's history seems to conjure up the evocation of a Quebecois female martyrdom. This is brought about by the fact that the narrative not only denounces women's plight and unfair treatments in times past, but also concentrates on specific incidents in which anonymous women have lost their lives. Once again, the notion of 'name', 'naming' and 'anonymity', in terms of non-recognition and exclusion, are central to this process which seeks to redress historical injustices. Through Flora's naming of these Quebecois women and her condemnation of their unjust deaths, they come to be seen as 'historical martyrs'. For instance, Flora chooses to bring back to life the young Renée Chauvreux, one of the *filles du Roi*, who was found dead in the snow, during her first winter in Canada. The heroine notices the three lines which barely account for Renée's death in the city's public records, and from the inventory of her possessions, she tries to understand what could have happened to young Renée: '[a] juré dans son coeur, sur sa part de Paradis, qu'elle n'épouserait pas Jacques Paviot, soldat de la Compagnie de M. de Contrecoeur avec qui elle a passé contrat de mariage' (p. 105) [[d]id swear in her heart, on her portion of Paradise, that she would not

²⁵ Mary Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 122.

²⁶ Jacqueline Ferry, 'Du Premier jardin au jardin des délices terrestres', *Op. Cit.*, p. 28.

marry Jacques Paviot, soldier in the company of Monsieur de Contrecoeur with whom she has entered into a contract of marriage (p. 84)]. Flora thus suggests that Renée Chauvreux was running away from an arranged match with a man she did not want to marry when she was caught out in the snow. This suggestion of imposed marriage ties in quite well with the idea of enforced maternity mentioned earlier on. Therefore, Flora seems to denounce the unfair death of the young *fille du Roi*, and by raising her out of the anonymity of her death, she elevates her to the status of martyr.

Her exploration of the past also takes Flora to more recent events and more recent unfair female deaths. She goes back to the end of the nineteenth century and tells the story of a young maid called Aurore Michaud, whose pretty features are coveted by the 'fils de la maison'. The heroine describes the young master's physical attraction for the maid in a way that emphasises class superiority and patriarchal pressure:

Le fils de la maison, qui est étudiant en droit, la suit de chambre en chambre dès qu'il en a l'occasion! Comment peut-on permettre, dans la maison paternelle, à une créature étrangère de dix-sept ans de se mouvoir aussi librement devant nous. (p. 118)

[The son of the household, a law student, follows her from room to room the minute he has the chance! How is it possible, in his father's house, to allow an unknown creature of seventeen to move about so freely before us? (p. 96)]

The royal 'nous', slightly ridiculous here as it is uttered by a youth, becomes a mockery of the son's assumed superiority. Expressions such as 'maison paternelle' and 'créature étrangère' underline the gender, as well as class conflicts between Aurore and the young master. She is marginalized as a foreign 'other' while he resides in the self-righteousness inherent to his status of wealthy heir. His feelings, however, are not reciprocated, and Aurore shies away from his indecent gestures. But she meets with a tragic death as her body is found raped and murdered in a neighbouring park. The assassin is never arrested, but it is strongly suggested that the son of the family, who ironically is destined to become a magistrate, could be responsible for Aurore's horrific death. This incident is reminiscent of what happens to Mary Whitney in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, and bears testimony to a similar attempt by the author to denounce the sexual harassment commonly encountered by female servants at the time, and the lack of resources available to these women. Both Hébert and Atwood show a contemporary understanding of issues of class and gender inequalities in their denunciation of a practice which, at the time, was not as clearly penalised as it is today.

In this context, and as seen previously, Flora's acting skills are essential in the process of bringing back to life some of Quebec's forgotten historical characters. She comes to symbolise the female artist, whose creative imagination allows her to alter these women's tragic destinies – a theme also encountered in *La Cage*. Art in the novel offers a medium for the denunciation of women's persecution in the past, but also represents a possible source of female marginalisation, as artistic expression has traditionally been a masculine domain: the heroine can thus be seen to perform a doubly controversial act. Moreover, art is practiced on two different levels in the text: while the heroine conjures up her own version of women's past, the author Anne Hébert is really the female artist behind the re-interpretation of Quebec's history. The novel thus presents a structure which is also present in Atwood's work: that of a female artist (Flora, Grace Marks, or Susanna Moodie) working within the larger framework of the (female) writer's own artistic creation.

Regarding the link between Flora's artistic activity and her attempts at re-living the past, one may wonder about her role as Winnie in Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*, a role which Flora rehearses intermittently throughout the novel for a performance which takes place at the end of the story. *Happy Days'* representation of time as an unstoppable agent, corroding away the lives (and bodies) of the two protagonists, presents, perhaps, an analogy to Flora's own incessant obsession with her past and her origins. But where Winnie is ineluctably being buried in the ground, promised to a certain death, Flora manages to liberate herself from the oppression of her past by facing her traumatic childhood memories in a cathartic moment at the end of the novel. Thus, Flora's role as Winnie serves perhaps to emphasise the liberation she experiences when she is able to leave her past behind, and face a new future.

Significantly, Flora also uses her artistic gift to embody unknown Quebecois female characters, as well as various famous female figures, such as Ophelia or Jeanne d'Arc, women who have distinguished themselves both in history and literature by their resistance to tradition, but also for having fallen victim to the patriarchal order. As mentioned earlier, the juxtaposition of both types of roles somehow highlights the narrative aspect of any historical record, but also helps the reader see the lives of these anonymous Quebecois women in light of that of the famous female cultural icons. When pondering over the circumstances of Renée Chauvreur's death for instance, Flora has flashbacks of playing the role of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As a result, Ophelia's tragic end, with its suggestion of female suicide caused by an unhappy love, comes to affect our understanding of Renée's own death, and adds emphasis to the horror of her situation. Bernard Aresu comments that to the 'great

literary texts' of the canon, Anne Hébert responds with the counter-current reality and refutation of over-shadowed and ex-centred texts.²⁷ Aresu talks of a 'déplacement' in terms of genre and cultural model, so that 'une petite morte, surprise par l'hiver' [a little dead girl, surprised by the winter] supplants the 'great' mythological dead woman that is Ophelia.²⁸ Aresu concludes that, with its fragmented poetics, the novel participates in a process of prismatic breaking down and refraction, as well as in an attempt at re-creation, all of which are typical features of postcolonial writing.²⁹

The reference to Joan of Arc also provides a powerful incentive in the text for both denouncing and rebelling against the established order. Joan's life story transcends the usual boundaries of the roles attributed to members of her sex, class and nationality, in the context of English-occupied France. She defied tradition by playing a prominent role on the battlefield, a place traditionally reserved for male heroic action, and by convincing the heir to the French throne to fight against the enemy, while she only came from a very modest social background. Her presence in *Le Premier jardin* thus contributes further to recognise women's important roles in the past, and to condemn the authorities which have oppressed or marginalized them. Indeed, Joan was judged to be too controversial, and therefore too dangerous to the authorities of the time; she was eventually condemned to die at the stake. As a result, her character has come to symbolise female persecution through fire, a theme which is echoed in *Le Premier jardin*, where a terrible fire burnt down Flora's orphanage one night and killed many of the orphan girls. The parallel between Joan's death and Flora's own close escape is highlighted when the heroine recalls her role as Jeanne d'Arc:

Jeanne en elle subit son procès et sa passion. Elle vient d'abjurer. Elle tremble.
Sa voix n'est plus qu'un fil tendu qui se brise:

- J'ai eu si peur d'être brûlée...

Soudain, Flora Fontanges n'est plus maîtresse des sons, des odeurs, des images qui se bousculent en elle. L'âcreté de la fumée, une enfant qui tousse et s'étouffe dans les ténèbres, le crépitement de l'enfer tout près, la chaleur suffocante, l'effroi dans sa pureté originelle. (p. 31)

[Joan in her is submitting to her trial and her death. She has just recanted. She trembles. Her voice is now a taut thread, breaking.

"I was so afraid of being burned..."

²⁷ Bernard Aresu, 'Québécois, postcolonial: À propos du *Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Carrefour de cultures: Mélanges offerts à Jacqueline Leiner*, edited by Régis Antoine (Narr, Tübingen, 1993), p. 562.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 563, quoting from Anne Hébert, *Le Premier jardin*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 105. Translation from Anne Hébert, *The First Garden*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 84.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 567.

Suddenly Flora Fontanges is no longer master of the sounds, the smells, the images that jostle within her. The acrid smoke, a small girl coughing and choking in the shadows, the crackling of hell close by, the suffocating heat, dread in its original purity. (p. 22)]

Joan of Arc's tragic death thus seems to add momentum to Flora's own past ordeal, while Flora draws from her memory of the fire for the rendition of her role as Joan. Both events appear to merge into a single highly emotional experience, and their sufferings, though of a different nature, are united to form a unique expression of female martyrdom. This helps emphasise the similarities Flora sees between the injustice of the religious authorities who condemned Joan to death for heresy, and the carelessness of the nuns which led to the orphanage fire killing so many innocent victims. Her denunciation of the latter is visible in the text when she describes the structure of the orphanage and the circumstances of the fire:

C'est une forteresse de femmes et d'enfants, hermétiquement close [...]
Tout le monde dort là-dedans, trente religieuses, trois cent soixante et onze petites filles de cinq à douze ans.

Ni extincteur, ni escalier de secours, ni gardien de nuit, aucun exercice de sauvetage. "Le Seigneur est mon berger", chantent-elles, toutes en chœur (p. 167)

[It is a fortress for women and children, hermetically sealed [...]

Everyone inside is asleep, thirty nuns, three hundred and seventy-one little girls aged from five to twelve.

No fire extinguisher, no fire escape, no night watchman, no fire drill. "The Lord is my shepherd," sing the girls in chorus (p. 138)]

We clearly feel here the accusing tone of the heroine who seems to hold the nuns' blind trust in God responsible for the tragedy that took place. The young orphans who met with what is felt to be an unfair death come to be seen as martyrs themselves, and seem to replicate Joan of Arc's own tragic end at the stake. This idea is reinforced by the long enumeration of names Flora gives when re-living the event:

Les mortes font du bruit dans sa gorge. Elle les nomme, une par une, et ses compagnes d'enfance viennent à l'appel de leur nom, de la plus grande à la plus petite, encore intactes et non touchées par le feu [...].

Alfreda Thibault
Laurette Levasseur
Jacqueline Racine
Marie-Marthe Morency
Théodora Albert [...]

Il faudrait les nommer toutes à haute voix, et qu'il y ait un témoin devant nous qui les entende, ces noms d'enfants brûlées vives (pp. 127-28)

[The dead women make a noise in her throat. She names them one by one, and the companions of her childhood come as their names are called, from tall to short, intact and untouched by fire [...].

Alfreda Thibault
Laurette Levasseur
Jacqueline Racine
Marie-Marthe Morency
Théodora Albert [...]

All must be named aloud, and a witness must be present to hear them, the names of these children who were burned alive (pp. 104-105)]

The list of names stands out from the text and recalls the one given for the *filles du Roi*, earlier in the narrative. In this instance, as with the *filles du Roi*, the heroine shows a will to acknowledge these children, and to take them out of the anonymity in which they died by having each of their names 'heard' by a 'witness'. This is particularly poignant as it refers to young, innocent girls who had 'lost' their names before they lost their lives: as mentioned earlier, they were abandoned in the orphanage, most of them anonymously, and they were then arbitrarily re-named by the nuns. Flora's choice to spell out her former inmates' names therefore suggests an attempt at giving them the recognition they never enjoyed even when alive. The symbolic importance of a person's name is a recurrent theme in the novel – and in Hébert's work. It comes to stand for the martyrdom of Quebecois women who died, it seems, because of the strict religious and patriarchal structures of the society in which they lived. Hébert denounces actively those structures and, with the help of artistic inspiration, shows how new ones can be envisaged and new roles for women can be created. Amy Reid remarks that by 'bespeaking the past in the presence of witnesses, Flora sets in motion a process of textualization that ensures the preservation of the recovered historical memory', whereby 'she assures that there will be others to cite the script after her'.³⁰

³⁰ Amy Reid, 'The Textual Grounding of *Québécoises* Identity: *Le Premier jardin* and *Kamouraska*', *Op. Cit.*, p. 282.

Conclusion

Through the novel's fictional returns to the past, the author demonstrates the importance of re-writing and re-interpreting Quebec's history. She presents a positive vision of Quebec's differentiation from the mother country, by revealing how the new settlers progressively became more independent and happily embraced the potential for change available on the new continent, a view which seems to modify and temper the rebellious ideas of the 1960s, which mainly perceived the mother country as a source of cultural inhibition. Another central aim behind the novel's process of historical re-interpretation is the denunciation of the injustice of any historical account excluding women, or the Native community. The novel insists in particular on the important roles women have played in the past and speaks for the recognition of their often overlooked merits. In this perspective, the narrative emphasises the importance of remembering these women's names, as a way to fight against the anonymity in which they died. The preservation of one's name comes also to be associated with the protection of one's sense of identity, in particular in the context of the oppressive social and religious structures through which these women have had to give up their names. Through the recognition of history's forgotten victims, Anne Hébert spells out a historical martyrdom of women who have suffered an unfair death at the hands of patriarchal society, and who have been silenced from historical records. Moreover, Hébert also underlines the importance of artistic imagination and creativity in her on-going process of establishing a (Quebécois) herstory.

Conclusion

Through its focus on the importance Anne Hébert and Margaret Atwood give to history and to actual historical figures in their novelistic, poetic, and dramatic production, this thesis sought to show how both authors deal with ‘the fundamental aspects of both Canadian history, specifically, and the writing of history, more generally’.¹ Atwood’s re-writing of the pioneering experience of nineteenth-century female settler Susanna Moodie is a good example of a work which addresses ‘some of the darker corners of Canadian history’, and which focuses on ‘characters quite different from the usual leaders of the historical pageant’.² Susanna Moodie, although published and widely read during her lifetime, did not achieve the fame and recognition which Atwood’s later re-visiting of her work has brought about. When Atwood first wrote about her, Moodie was still a fairly unknown figure, but one that vividly encapsulated for the young poet the division and fragmentation which the European pioneers suffered when they arrived in the colony. More particularly, through the contact with the Canadian wilderness, and through the difficult relinquishing of the mother country’s values, Atwood was able to illustrate some of the major factors which have affected later generations of Canadians’ perception of their surroundings. Her emphasis upon the specificity of these factors helps Atwood define Canada’s national consciousness and cultural identity in the twentieth century, two motives which have been recurrent in her work, as well as in that of Anne Hébert, in relation to Quebec.

Additionally, in her two poems ‘Marrying the Hangman’ and ‘Half-Hanged Mary’, Atwood also returns to the lives of ‘minor’ characters of North America’s past, and reveals the ways in which their predicaments were dictated by an oppressive puritan/patriarchal society, whose biased perception of women she locates primarily at the level of the female body. In both these instances, the exposure of society’s repressive rules is achieved through the depiction of the empowering effect which a negative female archetype can have in the resistance against patriarchal tyranny. Atwood’s focus on these overlooked aspects of Canada’s past is also in keeping with the concept of the ‘limited identities’ advocated by historians Cook and Careless: their emphasis on the importance of gender, class, and ethnic background in terms of historical inclusion becomes a powerful tool for celebrating what had

¹ Herb Wyile, Jennifer Andrews and Robert Viau, ‘Past Matters/ Choses du passé’, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

been previously (historically) ignored and judged 'peripheral'; as a result, the cultural identity of postcolonial Canada is re-asserted in the context of a European and American cultural hegemony.

The 'limited identities' approach is also visible in Atwood's short story 'The Bombardment Continues', which focuses on the tribulations of a central heroine subjected to religious, nationalistic and linguistic discrimination, caused by the particular elements of her personal background. The portrayal of these discriminations, and in particular of their transient, and therefore possibly irrelevant, nature, makes Atwood conclude that 'such compromises, such cross-cultural alliances, are not just a mark of today's Canadian society, but have been with us from the beginning', and thus promotes a new vision of the Canadian nation.³

Atwood again takes up a similar approach in *Alias Grace*, which revolves around an unknown nineteenth-century immigrant housemaid accused of murder. The detailed account of daily life in Ontario at the time provides a vivid insight into Canada's past, and into the way in which the latter was affected by class, gender, and ethnicity. Atwood uses the perspective of the 'limited identities' to both condemn the victimisation suffered by certain members of society, and to celebrate the specificity of the Canadian experience, especially in light of Canada's (post)colonial status, illustrated in the story by the point of view of the American doctor. Moreover, the representation of Grace Marks as a murderess/madwoman powerfully enables the author's criticism of nineteenth-century social, racial and gender prejudices.

Similarly in *Kamouraska*, Anne Hébert's re-writing of the life story of Elisabeth d'Aulnières, a nineteenth-century Quebecois woman also accused of murder, brings about a new vision of Quebec's past. The exposure of the alienating dictates of the bourgeoisie, and of the enforced roles of domesticity and motherhood imposed upon women at the time, are clearly highlighted through the depiction of Elisabeth's predicaments. The suggestion in particular that murder was the only alternative available to the heroine to protect herself against her violent husband was especially relevant for contemporary Quebecois women who in the 1960s were campaigning for access to divorce. Hébert also focuses on the small-scale knowledge of local places and customs in her rendition of nineteenth-century French Canada, and thus celebrates their importance and aesthetic worth in the face of a hegemonic culture which had traditionally ascribed Quebec to a minor and peripheral position.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ Margaret Atwood, 'The Bombardment Continues', Introductory Note, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

Hébert's two plays *La Cage* and *L'Île de la Demoiselle* also focus on the tribulations of a heroine previously confined to the 'darker corners of Canadian history'. Ludivine Corriveau and Marguerite de Nontron, for different reasons, are vilified and arbitrarily punished by an oppressive patriarchal order which posits their female bodies as the objects of its sexual and colonial desire. Women's persecution and Quebec's colonisation are thus likened, and illustrated by the heroines' communion with Nature, which becomes a source of strength or transformation – a trope in keeping with the discourse of *américanité*. Hébert rehabilitates both heroines and symbolically changes their destinies by re-inscribing their life stories within the literary canon.

In *Le Premier jardin*, Hébert returns to episodes and characters from Quebec's past which had previously been disregarded, such as the role played by the *filles du Roi*, the nineteenth-century servant class, or simply unknown women from previous ages, and reveals the prejudiced discrimination which has kept these female protagonists out of history. Hébert re-asserts their importance, as well as that of Quebec's re-valued local past, by offering a vision which, although set in Quebec City, purposely omits any reference to well-known or mainstream names of places, people or events. The author thus expects a certain knowledge of Quebec and its cultural landscape from her readers, an attitude which confirms the process of cultural legitimisation she is engaged in.

Both authors address the 'mechanics of historical representation – the conventions and textual devices that both permit and complicate the representation of pastness' in their work, and do probe into the very nature of history writing.⁴ This was visible in Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, where the gaps and the 'unsaid' of the settler's vision were created, according to Atwood, by the set of European values she brought with her, and by her inability to reconcile herself with her new environment. Consequently, Moodie censures some aspects of her version of life in the colony, and is unable to voice certain elements of it, an attitude which she had previously adopted in her writing of the life story of former slave Mary Prince: both cases reveal the influence which her colonial mindset had over the shaping and selecting process involved in her writings.

In her short story 'The Bombardment Continues', Atwood also challenges the nature of history writing by presenting the testimony of a witness to the 1759 Battle of the Conquest: Marie Payzant is writing a series of letters to her children, in which her personal perspective of the events is highlighted. The letters, however, are meant to reach beyond the realm of

⁴ Herb Wyile, Jennifer Andrews and Robert Viau, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

private family history by being in fact aimed at Marie's descendants – in the wider meaning of the word – among whom is Atwood herself. In both these texts, the author raises questions as to the possibility of representing the past, and as to the impact that history's narrative quality plays in the process.

But most visibly in *Alias Grace* Atwood shows her will to contest hegemonic historical discourses: she does so by presenting the version of the defeated radicals during the 1837-38 Rebellions, or by adopting the perspective of working-class housemaids. Through the latter's vision of society, and through the novel's omission of any recognisable historical name or event, Atwood paints a portrait of nineteenth-century Canada which challenges traditional understandings of the history of the period, and which moves away from hegemonic historical accounts. In this respect, the use of the metaphor of the 'patchwork' is particularly pertinent in describing the multitude of identities coexisting in Canada, and the multitude of different minute narrative threads necessary for the 'bigger picture' to emerge. In her play *Grace*, Atwood further demonstrates the influence of Susanna Moodie's version of her visit to Grace Marks, and through the post-modern ironic time-travelling sequence she illustrates the impact which the nineteenth-century author has had on subsequent visions of nineteenth-century Canada, thus highlighting the bias of the personal perspective involved in the process of historical representation.

Similarly, in *Kamouraska* Anne Hébert shows how the heroine's feverish narrative, concerned solely with the private vision of her personal past, questions the authority of more 'official' historical versions. Elisabeth's story spans several different time periods and moves smoothly from one to the other with no interruption in the flow of her narrative, therefore questioning conventional historical linearity by imposing her own multi-dimensional perspective on the events of her past. The author reveals the gaps and biases of Elisabeth's version, by highlighting the way in which the latter is affected by her white middle-class upbringing, and by the prejudice of her milieu against members of the Native population, but also against the rural French Canadian community. Elisabeth's ambiguous relationship to the British imperial centre, on one hand, and to her Native servant, on the other, are shown to be the results of a process of social conditioning enforced by her society and by the colonial presence. Moreover, the intrusion of extracts from the archival documents of Elisabeth's murder trial, quoted in their original English, fragments the French text and vividly illustrates the tensions between marginal and central in terms of historical discourses.

In *La Cage*, Hébert challenges still further historical narration by using the genre of the fairy tale to re-write the story of Ludivine Corriveau. Through the traditional tropes of the

fairy tale, and the inclusion of supernatural elements, Hébert helps establish the idea of a tale incessantly repeating itself, and carrying truths, or values, relevant to any audience, regardless of their historical era. It was shown indeed how the fairy tale transcends the normal human boundaries of time and reality by featuring timeless and ‘supernatural’ events, or characters. The fairy tale also has implications in terms of a particular notion of historical narrative: indeed, the prominence of the Fairies in the play, and the way in which they dictate the future, raise the idea that historical events are pre-determined, and that history is pre-ordered along criteria of birth, class and gender. However, the fact that the Fairies’ predictions do not eventually come true highlights the importance of the role played by the heroine: she shows that by resisting this pre-determination, she is able to change a fate which, at first, seemed immutable.

Le Premier jardin is probably Hébert’s most visible questioning of the traditional authority associated with ‘official’ historical versions: through the figure of an actress and the use of the trope of dramatic interpretation, Hébert revisits the past of the city of Quebec and highlights the ways in which acting and historical research share similar qualities through their attempts to re-live the past. Through Flora Fontanges’s efforts to bring back to life some of Quebec’s forgotten female characters, she shows how artistic creation allows several versions of the facts to be heard, including versions which go against her own. Flora emphasises the fictional, or narrative, quality of history by intertwining it with some of her theatre roles. As a result, the long list of female names which she unearths from Quebec’s ‘dusty’ archives symbolically denounces the unfair treatment these women received, and calls for a renewed assertion of their importance in the face of totalising historical discourses.

Consequently, it becomes apparent that Anne Hébert and Margaret Atwood are concerned with Canadian history, specifically, and with the writing of history, more generally. A similar wish to re-interpret, and at times re-write, the past of their nation seems to be expressed by both authors. However, the above discussion seems to reveal that there are different types of historical ‘re-writing’ at work in the selection of works examined: some appear to focus on the ‘limited identities’ aspect of history, while others take up a ‘subaltern history’ approach to the representation of the past. *Alias Grace* and *Kamouraska*, for instance, are prime examples of a ‘limited identities’ perspective, as both texts actually focus on the particularities of one character, and show in what ways the factors of gender, class, and ethnicity affect that protagonist’s life. *Le Premier jardin*, on the other hand, deals essentially with notions of historiography, in terms of the different types of histories which the heroine’s attempts at re-creating the lives of a multitude of different female characters bring about.

These historical female figures have suffered historical exclusion, as well as, at times, patriarchal persecution, and the Quebecois female martyrdom which is thus conjured up by Flora can be seen as an example of 'subaltern history', in the way in which it seems to constitute a unified group defined by a common discrimination.

Moreover, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* could also be perceived as an instance of 'subaltern history' in the way in which the poems, although centring around the figure of the nineteenth-century settler, do use her character as a template within which the act of nineteenth-century European colonisation, and the writings which came with it, can be examined. Indeed, very few actual details relating to Moodie's life are revealed in the poem sequence, which seems to use her as a representation of the type of partial and fragmented (historical) colonial writing which took place at the time, and as a way to address the impact which this subsequently had on Canada's process of nation formation. Therefore, by assuming that Moodie embodies nineteenth-century settlers more generally, and that the latter constitute a compact group motivated by similar purposes, it seems Atwood presents us with a 'subaltern history' approach to the period, while bearing in mind that the notion of 'subaltern' here represents the 'unsaid', or the 'repressed', in terms of colonial discourse, even though the settlers themselves assumed hegemonic historical representation.

Differences between both authors also seem to appear in relation to the ways in which they portray their characters. Anne Hébert seems to identify with, and closely relate to her heroines in a way which is reminiscent of Flora's own embodiment of female figures from Quebec's past in *Le Premier jardin*. Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, appears to remain more distant from her protagonists, and to treat them as literary creations which she organises and directs from behind a figurative 'stage'. Similarly, the different types of feminist thought which were alluded to in the introduction to this thesis seem to have had an impact on the writings of Atwood and Hébert. The influence of Anglo-American Feminism and its concern with questions of class, economic, political and social factors was made apparent in Atwood's work, and particularly in the study of *Alias Grace*, with its immigrant working-class heroine. The importance which French/Francophone Feminism places upon the mother, the womb and the female body was visible in Hébert's *La Cage* and *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, where the heroine's body was seen as the source of her persecution, and where motherhood, through an association with the natural world, became the means of her liberation.

However, the boundary between each trend of the movement is questioned in the case of Atwood and Hébert: this study has shown the ways in which Hébert deals with questions of class and social factors, and emphasises the effects these have had on the definition of gender

roles. This was the case of Elisabeth in *Kamouraska*, and of the numerous unknown female figures from the past which Flora conjures up in *Le Premier jardin*: in both works, Hébert stresses the importance of economic and political issues in women's victimisation in the past. Similarly, in such poems as 'Half-Hanged Mary' and 'Marrying the Hangman', Atwood highlights the role of the female body in women's oppression, but also shows how it can be the means of women's resistance and rebellion against patriarchal domination. Therefore, it seems that both types of feminist thought have influenced the work of each author, and have had an impact upon their imagination, regardless of their cultural, political and linguistic differences.

One also notices similarities in Atwood and Hébert's use of irony and inter-textual parody. The time-travelling sequence of Atwood's *Grace*, the 'tongue in cheek' comments made by Grace Marks about the diagnosis of the doctors at the Asylum, and the way in which 'Half-Hanged Mary' reveals that her (female) body was the reason behind her witchcraft accusation, all are instances in which Atwood uses irony to simultaneously adopt and contest the dominant (patriarchal) discourse, thus speaking from within such discourse so as to better undermine it. Similarly, Elisabeth d'Aulnières's remark about the 'few acres of snowy waste' which make up Quebec, the testimony of the 'seven Deadly Sins' at Ludivine's trial in *La Cage*, and Flora's mercantile enumeration of the ship's content in her remembering of the arrival of the *filles du Roi*, also indicate that Hébert uses irony as a way of seemingly endorsing the (colonial) hegemonic version, while at the same time denouncing its limitations and showing its unfair bias.

Moreover, instances of inter-textual parody were made visible in Atwood's *Journals*, and to a certain extent in *Grace*, which quite literally are re-visittings, and re-writings, of Susanna Moodie's own work; while in *Alias Grace*, the complex selection and arrangement of the novel's epigraphs, together with the narrative they constitute in themselves, become a form of parody, a response from the margins to the centre, and from the culturally 'minor' to the canon. In *Le Premier jardin*, Flora's intertwining of theatre roles with the lives of unknown Quebecois women from the past quite visibly operates a form of rapprochement, and parody, between the established hegemonic text, and the forgotten and unofficial oral version. Furthermore, *Kamouraska*'s reference to, and challenging of, the original archive documents of Elisabeth's trial, also constitute an instance of inter-textual parody, by which the heroine is able to respond to the accusations made against her in English, and to replace them by her own version, in French.

More generally, the apparent self-awareness in their approach to history, and the conscious attempt at raising questions relating to the nature of history writing, highlight the ways in which the works studied above fit into Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction. It could therefore be argued that Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert, although stemming from very distinct cultural, political and linguistic backgrounds, share surprising similarities in their handling of Canadian history, and in their use of the genre of historical fiction. Consequently, in response to the question raised at the beginning of this thesis, it seems that, in the case of Atwood and Hébert, the 'two solitudes' separating French- and English-Canadian literature have indeed become 'two solitudes'. Besides, the focus on the work of both authors, and the will to transcend, but not ignore, cultural and linguistic differences which has guided this thesis, could also raise wider issues regarding Canadian history and its possible re-writing. The study of the work of other Canadian writers from a diversity of cultural, political and linguistic backgrounds, for instance, could be a means of promoting an encompassing vision of the role history has to play in the definition of Canada's imagined national narrative, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Bibliography

Primary Material

Atwood, Margaret, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1970).

Atwood, Margaret, *Grace* (1979; Unpublished manuscript, filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Half-Hanged Mary', *Morning in the Burned House* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1995), pp. 58-69.

Atwood, Margaret, *Alias Grace* (1996; Virago Press, London, 1997).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Marrying the Hangman', *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (Virago Press, London, 1998), pp. 209-11.

Atwood, Margaret, 'The Bombardment Continues', *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in our History* (Doubleday, Toronto, 2001), pp. 8-23.

Hébert, Anne, *Kamouraska* (1970; Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1997).

Hébert, Anne, *Kamouraska* (PaperJacks, Don Mills, Ontario, 1974).

Hébert, Anne, *Le Premier jardin* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1988).

Hébert, Anne, *The First Garden* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1990).

Hébert, Anne, *La Cage*, suivi de *L'Île de la Demoiselle* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 1990).

Secondary Material

Aresu, Bernard, 'Québécois, postcolonial: À propos du *Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Carrefour de cultures: Mélanges offerts à Jacqueline Leiner*, Antoine, Régis (ed.), (Narr, Tübingen, 1993), pp. 555-68.

Atwood, Margaret, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972; McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1996).

Atwood, Margaret, *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1977).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Witches: the Strong Neck of a Favorite Ancestor', *Radcliffe Quarterly* (Vol. 66, n° 3, 1980), pp. 4-6.

Atwood, Margaret, 'The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School', *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1982), pp. 215-28.

Atwood, Margaret, 'Contemporary History, as Reflected in Contemporary Literature' (1986; Unpublished manuscript, filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Susanna Moodie', Introduction to Moodie, Susanna, *Roughing It in the Bush* (Virago Press, London, 1986), (1986; Unpublished manuscript, filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto).

Atwood, Margaret, *The Robber Bride* (1993; Virago Press, London, 1994).

Atwood, Margaret, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995).

Atwood, Margaret, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *The American Historical Review* (Vol. 103, n° 5, 1998), pp. 1503-16.

Atwood, Margaret and Beaulieu, Victor-Lévy, *Two Solicitudes: Conversations* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1998).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For', from www.owtoad.com/ophelia.html (September 6th 2002).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', from www.owtoad.com/vlness.html (September 6th 2002).

Atwood, Margaret, 'Writing *Susanna*', from www.owtoad.com (March 21st 2003).

Beaudoin, Réjean, 'Axes de comparaison entre deux littératures', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 24, n° 3, 1999), pp. 480-94.

Beaudoin, Réjean, 'Comparer les littératures canadiennes, pour quoi faire?', *Québec français* (n° 117, 2000), pp. 68-70.

Beer, Gillian, 'Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past', *The Feminist Reader*, Belsey, Catherine and Moore, Jane (eds.), (Macmillan Press, London, 1997), pp. 77-90.

Bhabha, Homi K., 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, London, 1994), pp. 85-92.

Bilan, R.P., 'Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*', *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* (Vol. 2, 1978), pp. 1-12.

Bishop, Neil B., *Anne Hébert, son oeuvre, leurs exils* (Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, Talence, 1993).

Bliss, Michael, 'Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada', *The Journal of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 26, n° 4, 1991-92), pp. 5-17.

Boivin, Aurélien, 'Anne Hébert: Un intérêt marqué pour l'histoire', *Québec français* (n° 101, 1996), pp. 74-76.

Bouchard, Gérard, 'Sur les mutations de l'historiographie québécoise: Les chemins de la maturité', *La Société québécoise après 30 ans de changements*, Dumont, Fernand (ed.), (Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, Quebec City, 1990), pp. 253-272.

Bouchard, Gérard, 'Le Québec comme collectivité neuve: Le refus de l'américanité dans le discours de la survivance', *Québécois et Américains: La culture québécoise aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Bouchard, Gérard and Lamonde, Yvan (eds.), (Fides, Montreal, 1995), pp. 15-60.

Bouchard, Gérard, 'La Réécriture de l'histoire nationale au Québec: Quelle histoire? Quelle nation?', *À Propos de l'histoire nationale*, Comeau, Robert and Dionne, Bernard (eds.), (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1998), pp. 115-141.

Bouchard, Gérard, *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 2000).

Boucher-Marchand, Monique, 'La Réécriture mythique dans *Le Premier jardin*: Une épiphanie moderne', *Les Cahiers Anne Hébert* (n° 2, 2000), pp. 43-57.

Boudreau, Douglas L., 'Anglophone Presence in the Early Novels of Anne Hébert', *The French Review* (Vol. 74, n° 2, 2000), pp. 308-18.

Brandt, Gail Cuthbert, 'Postmodern Patchwork: Some Recent Trends in the Writing of Women's History in Canada', *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 72, n° 4, 1991), pp. 441-470.

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, New York, 1990).

Cambron, Micheline, "'La Cage", suivi de "L'Île de la Demoiselle"', *Cahiers de théâtre JEU* (n° 60, 1991), pp. 201-3.

Careless, J.M.S., "'Limited Identities" in Canada', *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 50, n° 1, 1969), pp. 1-10.

Carrière, Marie, *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002).

Chapman, Rosemary, *Siting the Quebec Novel: The Representation of Space in Francophone Writing in Quebec* (Peter Lang, Oxford, 2000).

Cixous, Hélène, and Clément, Catherine, *The Newly Born Woman* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986).

Cohen, Henry, 'Le Rôle du mythe dans *Kamouraska* d'Anne Hébert', *Présence Francophone* (n° 12, 1976), pp. 103-11.

Cook, Ramsay, 'Canadian Centennial Cerebrations', *International Journal* (Vol. 22, 1967), pp. 659-63.

Cook, Ramsay, "'Identities Are Not Like Hats'", *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 81, n° 2, 2000), pp. 260-65.

Côté, Paul Raymond, 'Kamouraska ou l'influence d'une tradition', *The French Review* (Vol. 63, n° 1, 1989), pp. 99-110.

Davidson, Arnold E., 'Canadian Gothic and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Vol. 27, n° 2, 1981), pp. 243-54.

Davidson, Arnold E., 'Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden Castro, Jan (eds.), (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1988), pp. 113-21.

Davidson, Arnold E. (ed.), *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays* (The Modern Language Association of America, New York, 1990).

Desjardins, Nancy, 'Le Passé recomposé: La présence de l'Histoire dans le roman québécois contemporain (1980-1995)', *Thèse, antithèse, synthèse II*, Coulombe, Marie-Pierre and Duchesne, Yolaine (eds.), (UQAM, Comité étudiant du doctorat en études littéraires, Montreal, 1999), pp. 37-48.

Desmeules, Georges, 'Anne Hébert et Margaret Atwood: Une seule et même solitude', *Québec français* (n° 117, 2000), pp. 74-76.

Dufault, Roseanna, 'History and Herstory in *L'Île de la Demoiselle*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, Pallister, Janis L. (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 179-86.

Duffy, Dennis, *Sounding the Iceberg: An Essay on Canadian Historical Novels* (ECW Press, Toronto, 1986).

Dumont, Micheline, 'L'Histoire nationale peut-elle intégrer la réflexion féministe sur l'histoire?', *À Propos de l'histoire nationale*, Comeau, Robert and Dionne, Bernard (eds.), (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1998), pp. 19-36.

Édmond, Maurice, *La Femme à la fenêtre: L'univers symbolique d'Anne Hébert dans Les Chambres de bois, Kamouraska et Les Enfants du sabbat* (Presses de l'Université Laval, Quebec City, 1984).

Falardeau, Érick, 'Fictionalisation de l'histoire, *Le Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 22, n° 3, 1997), pp. 557-68.

Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, London, 1986).

Ferraro, Alessandra, 'Le Rôle de l'Histoire dans *Le Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Anne Hébert, parcours d'une œuvre: Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne*, Ducrocq-Poirier, Madeleine (ed.), (L'Hexagone, Montreal, 1997), pp. 369-81.

Ferry, Jacqueline, 'Du Premier jardin au jardin des délices terrestres', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* (n° 80, 1993), pp. 17-30.

Fortin, Nicole, *Une Littérature inventée: Littérature québécoise et critique universitaire (1965-1975)* (Presses de l'Université Laval, Quebec City, 1994).

Freud, Sigmund, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', *Case Histories I: 'Dora' and 'Little Hans'*, Strachey, James and Richards, Angela (eds.), (Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 8, Penguin Books, London, 1977), pp. 31-164.

Frye, Northrop, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1971).

Gaulin, André, 'Lecture politique d'Anne Hébert: Point de vue d'une protagoniste', *Québec français* (n° 92, 1994), pp. 77-82.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Gubar, Susan, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979).

Godard, Barbara, 'My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert', *Essays on Canadian Writing* (n° 26, 1983), pp. 13-44.

Godard, Barbara, 'Une Littérature en devenir: La réécriture textuelle et le dynamisme du champ littéraire. Les Écrivaines québécoises au Canada anglais', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 24, n° 3, 1999), pp. 495-527.

Godbout, Jacques (dir.), 'Anne Hébert, 1916-2000', film documentary (2000).

Goodman, Lizbeth, 'Madwomen and Attics: Themes and Issues in Women's Fiction', *Literature and Gender*, Goodman, Lizbeth (ed.), (Routledge, London, 1996), pp. 109-44.

Gould, Karen, *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1990).

Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Hoare, Quintin and Smith, Geoffrey Nowell (eds.), (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971).

Granatstein, J.L., *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Harper Collins, Toronto, 1998).

Green, Mary Jean, 'The Witch and the Princess: The Feminine Fantastic in the Fiction of Anne Hébert', *American Review of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 15, n° 2, 1985), pp. 137-46.

Green, Mary Jean, 'Dismantling the Colonizing Text: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *The French Review* (Vol. 66, n° 6, 1993), pp. 959-66.

Green, Mary Jean, 'The Quebec Novel Today: Multiple Perspectives', *The French Review* (Vol. 67, n° 6, 1994), pp. 922-29.

Green, Mary Jean, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2001).

Griffiths, Rudyard, *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in our History*, Preface (Doubleday, Toronto, 2001), pp. vii-x.

Groening, Laura, 'The Journals of Susanna Moodie: A Twentieth-Century Look at a Nineteenth-Century Life', *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Vol. 8, n° 2, 1983), pp. 166-180.

Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Maroussia, 'La Sorcière dans le texte (québécois) au féminin', *The French Review* (Vol. 58, n° 2, 1984), pp. 260-68.

Hammill, Faye, 'Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and "That Moodie Bitch"', *The American Review of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 29, n° 1, 1999), pp. 67-91.

Hammond, Karla, 'Defying Distinctions', *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, Ingersoll, Earl G. (ed.), (Ontario Review Press, New York, 1990), pp. 99-108.

Harger-Grinling, Virginia and Chadwick, Tony, 'Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: Individuals in History', *Études canadiennes/ Canadian Studies* (n° 49, 2000), pp. 51-57.

Harvey, Robert, *Poétique d'Anne Hébert: Jeunesse et genèse* (Éditions de L'Instant même, Montreal, 2000).

Howells, Coral Ann, *Margaret Atwood* (Macmillan Press, London, 1996).

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Parody* (Methuen, London, 1985).

Hutcheon, Linda, "'Shape Shifters": Canadian Women Novelists and the Challenge to Tradition', *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, Neuman, Shirley and Kamboureli, Smaro (eds.), (Longspoon/ NeWest Press, Alberta, 1986), pp. 219-27.

Hutcheon, Linda, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1988).

Hutcheon, Linda, 'The Canadian Postmodern: Fiction in English Since 1960', *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays*, Davidson, Arnold E. (ed.), (The Modern Language Association of America, New York, 1990), pp. 18-33.

Hutcheon, Linda, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario, 1991).

Johnston, Susan, 'Reconstructing the Wilderness: Margaret Atwood's Reading of Susanna Moodie', *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* (Vol. 31, 1992), pp. 28-54.

Jones, D.G., *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1970).

Jump, Harriet Devine, 'Margaret Atwood: Taking the Capital W off Woman', *Diverse Voices: Essays on Twentieth-Century Women Writers in English*, Jump, Harriet Devine (ed.), (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1991), pp. 98-121.

Kègle, Christiane, 'Le Discours de l'Autre dans *Kamouraska*: Convergence du désir de la matrice et du motif de la folie', *Les Cahiers Anne Hébert* (n° 2, 2000), pp. 145-59.

Keith, W. J., *Canadian Literature in English* (Longman Literature in English Series, New York, 1985).

Kertzer, Jonathan, *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1998).

Knelman, Judith, 'Can We Believe What the Newspapers Tell Us? Missing Links in *Alias Grace*', *University of Toronto Quarterly* (Vol. 68, n° 2, 1999), pp. 677-86.

Knight, Kelton W., *Anne Hébert: In Search of the First Garden* (Peter Lang, New York, 1998).

Kolodny, Annette, 'Margaret Atwood and the Politics of Narrative', *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays*, Davidson, Arnold E. (ed.), (The Modern Language Association of America, New York, 1990), pp. 90-109.

Koski, Raija, Kells, Kathleen and Forsyth, Louise (eds.), *Les Discours féminins dans la littérature postmoderne au Québec* (Em Text, San Francisco, 1993).

Kröller, Eva-Marie, 'Resurrections: Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill and Emily Carr in Contemporary Canadian Literature', *Journal of Popular Culture* (Vol. 15, n° 3, 1981), pp. 39-46.

Lacourcière, Luc, 'Le Triple destin de Marie-Josephte Corriveau (1733-1763)', *Cahiers des Dix* (Vol. 33, 1968), pp. 213-242.

Lacourcière, Luc, 'Le Destin posthume de la Corriveau', *Cahiers des Dix* (Vol. 34, 1969), pp. 239-71.

Lacoursière, Jacques, Provencher, Jean and Vaugeois, Denis, *Canada, Québec: Synthèse historique, 1534-2000* (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 2001).

Lane, Patrick, 'The Unyielding Phrase', *Canadian Literature* (n° 122 and 123, 1989), pp. 57-64.

La Presse, 'Arts et spectacles', Friday 21st January 1994.

Leblond, Sylvio, 'Le Drame de Kamouraska d'après les documents de l'époque', *Cahiers des Dix* (Vol. 37, 1972), pp. 239-73.

Le Devoir, 'Culture', Wednesday 28th August 1996.

Lennox, John, 'Dark Journeys: *Kamouraska* and *Deliverance*', *Essays on Canadian Writing* (n° 12, 1978), pp. 84-104.

Le Soleil, 'Arts et spectacles', Wednesday 15th April 1998.

Létourneau, Jocelyn, *Passer à l'avenir: Histoire, mémoire, identité dans le Québec d'aujourd'hui* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 2000).

Lintvelt, Jaap, 'La Recherche historique et identitaire dans *Le Premier jardin* d'Anne Hébert', *Culture et colonisation en Amérique du Nord: Canada, États-Unis, Mexique*, Lintvelt, Jaap, Ouellet, Réal and Hermans, Hub (eds.), (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1994), p. 281-94.

Lord, Marie-Linda, 'L'Épreuve de la marge face à l'Autre: Les États-Unis dans les romans d'Antonine Maillet et de David Adams Richards', *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities/ Littératures canadiennes et identités postcoloniales*, Maufort, Marc and Bellarsi, Franca (eds.), (Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes – Peter Lang, Brussels, 2002), pp. 61-78.

Mackey, Eva, "'Death by Landscape": Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology', *Canadian Woman Studies/ Les Cahiers de la femme* (Vol. 20, n° 2, 2000), pp. 125-30.

March, Cristie, 'Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Vol. 22, n° 2, 1997), pp. 66-82.

Maufort, Marc and Bellarsi, Franca (eds.), *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities/ Littératures canadiennes et identités postcoloniales* (Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes – Peter Lang, Brussels, 2002).

McClintock, Anne, *Double Crossings: Madness, Sexuality and Imperialism* (Ronsdale Press, Vancouver, 2001).

McKay, Mélissa, 'Le Pouvoir masculin contrarié: La Confrontation entre la femme et l'histoire dans *La Cage* et *L'Île de la Demoiselle* d'Anne Hébert', *Études francophones* (Vol. 13, n° 1, 1998), pp. 19-28.

McKillop, A.B., 'Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches', *The Canadian Historical Review* (Vol. 80, n° 2, 1999), pp. 269-99.

McPherson, Karen S., 'The Letter of the Law in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*', *Québec Studies* (n° 8, 1989), pp. 17-25.

Merler, Grazia, 'Cage de Fer', *Canadian Literature* (n° 133, 1992), pp. 187-89.

Michael, Magali Cornier, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Vol. 47, n° 2, 2001), pp. 421-47.

Moodie, Susanna, *Roughing It in the Bush; or, Life in Canada* (1852; McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1989).

Moodie, Susanna, *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853; McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1989).

Morris, Pam, *Literature and Feminism* (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1993).

Morton, Desmond, 'L'Histoire nationale est-elle possible au Canada?', À *Propos de l'histoire nationale*, Comeau, Robert and Dionne, Bernard (eds.), (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1998), pp. 77-83.

Morton, W.L., *The Canadian Identity* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1961).

Murray, Jennifer, 'Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Vol. 26, n° 1, 2001), pp. 65-83.

Nepveu, Pierre, *L'Écologie du réel: Mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine* (Éditions du Boréal, Montreal, 1988).

Neuman, Shirley and Kamboureli, Smaro (eds.), *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* (Longspoon/ NeWest Press, Alberta, 1986).

Niederhoff, Burkhard, 'How to Do Things with History: Researching Lives in Carol Shields' *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 35, n° 2, 2000), pp. 71-85.

Northey, Margot, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1976).

Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari Wa, 'The Female Liminal Place, or Survival Between the Rock and the Hard Place: A Reading of Anne Hébert's *L'Île de la Demoiselle*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, Pallister, Janis L. (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 187-95.

O'Meara, Maureen, 'Living with the Cultural Legacy of La Corriveau: *La Cage*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, Pallister, Janis L. (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 161-78.

Pallister, Janis L., 'La Corriveau, historique et légendaire', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, Pallister, Janis L. (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 335-42.

Parr, Joy, 'Gender History and Historical Practice', *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History*, Shore, Marlene (ed.), (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), pp. 285-88.

Pascal-Smith, Gabrielle, 'La Condition féminine dans *Kamouraska* d'Anne Hébert', *The French Review* (Vol. 54, n° 1, 1980), pp. 85-92.

Perrot, Michelle (ed.), *Writing Women's History* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992).

Purdy, A.W., 'Atwood's Moodie', *Canadian Literature* (n° 47, 1971), pp. 80-84.

Rea, Annabelle M., 'The Climate of Viol/Violence and Madness in Anne Hébert's *Les Fous de bassan*', *Québec Studies* (n° 4, 1986), pp. 170-83.

Rea, Annabelle M., 'Marie-Joseph becomes Ludivine: The Family Reformed in Anne Hébert's *La Cage*', *Doing Gender: Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s*, Gilbert, Paula Ruth and Dufault, Roseanna L. (eds.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 23-35.

Reid, Amy, 'The Textual Grounding of *Québécoises* Identity: *Le Premier jardin* and *Kamouraska*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, L. Pallister, Janis (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 274-85.

Renan, Ernest, 'What is a Nation?', *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha, Homi K. (ed.), (Routledge, London, 1990), pp. 8-22.

Rigney, Barbara Hill, *Margaret Atwood* (Macmillan Education, London, 1987).

Rogerson, Margaret, 'Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 33, n° 1, 1998), pp. 5-22.

Rudin, Ronald, 'Le Rôle de l'histoire comparée dans l'historiographie québécoise', *À Propos de l'histoire nationale*, Comeau, Robert and Dionne, Bernard (eds.), (Éditions du Septentrion, Quebec City, 1998), pp. 103-113.

Rudin, Ronald, 'Revisionism and the Search for a Normal Society: A Critique of Recent Quebec Historical Writing', *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History*, Shore, Marlene (ed.), (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), pp. 235-241.

Russell, D.W., 'Quatre versions d'une légende canadienne', *Canadian Literature* (n° 94, 1982), pp. 172-78.

Sachs, Murray, 'Love on the Rocks: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*', *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec*, Lewis, Paula Gilbert (ed.), (Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1985), pp. 109-23.

Saint-Martin, Lori, '*La Cage*, suivi de *L'Île de la Demoiselle* d'Anne Hébert', *Spirale* (n° 98, 1990), p. 21.

Saint-Martin, Lori, 'Écriture et combat féministe: Figures de la sorcière dans l'écriture des femmes au Québec', *Québec Studies* (n° 12, 1991), pp. 67-82.

Saint-Martin, Lori, 'Le Métaféminisme et la nouvelle prose féminine au Québec', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 18, n° 1, 1992), pp. 78-88.

Saint-Martin, Lori, 'Les Premières mères, *Le Premier jardin*', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 20, n° 3, 1995), pp. 667-81.

Salih, Sara, *Judith Butler* (Routledge, London, 2002).

Scott, Joan Wallach (ed.), *Feminism and History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996).

Servin, Henri, 'Une Lecture du corps dans *Kamouraska* d'Anne Hébert', *Québec Studies* (n° 4, 1986), pp. 184-93.

Shields, Carol, *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* (1977; Borealis Press, Ottawa, 1997).

Showalter, Elaine, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (Virago Press, London, 1985).

Showalter, Elaine, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (Picador, London, 1997).

Silverman, Eliane Leslau, 'Writing Canadian Women's History, 1970-82: An Historiographical Analysis', *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History*, Shore, Marlene (ed.), (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002), pp. 278-281.

Slott, Kathryn, 'La Remise en question de la Corriveau dans *La Cage* d'Anne Hébert', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, Pallister, Janis L. (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 149-60.

Smart, Patricia, *Writing in the Father's House: The Emergence of the Feminine in the Quebec Literary Tradition* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1991).

Smith, Erin, 'Gender and National Identity in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey*', *Frontiers* (Vol. 13, n° 2, 1993), pp. 75-88.

Smyth, Jacqui, "'Divided Down the Middle": A Cure for *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*', *Essays in Canadian Writing* (Vol. 47, 1992), pp. 149-162.

Sparrow, Fiona, "'This Place is Some Kind of a Garden": Clearings in the Bush in the Works of Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Lawrence', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 25, n° 1, 1990), pp. 24-41.

Spaull, Sue, 'Gynocriticism', *Feminist Readings/ Feminists Reading*, Mills, Sara and Pearce, Lynne (eds.), (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1989), pp. 83-121.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Williams, Patrick and Chrisman, Laura (eds.), (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1994), pp. 66-111.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Warhol, Robyn R. and Herndl, Diane Price (eds.), (Macmillan Press, London, 1997), pp. 896-912.

Staels, Hilde, 'Intertexts of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Vol. 46, n° 2, 2000), pp. 427-50.

Stanzel, F.K., 'Innocent Eyes? Canadian Landscape as Seen by Frances Brooke, Susanna Moodie and Others', *International Journal of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 4, 1991), pp. 97-109.

Stringer, Kim, 'Shared Experiences: Susanna Moodie Relived in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*', *British Journal of Canadian Studies* (Vol. 15, n° 1 and 2, 2002), pp. 170-181.

Sturzer, Felicia B., "'It is that damned woman that has ruined me": The Fragmented Feminine in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*', *The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works; Night and the Day Are One*, Pallister, Janis L. (ed.), (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2001), pp. 31-39.

Talbot, Emile J., 'The Signifying Absence: Reading *Kamouraska* Politically', *Canadian Literature* (n° 130, 1991), pp. 194-200.

Vanasse, André, 'L'Écriture et l'ambivalence: Entrevue avec Anne Hébert', *Voix et Images* (Vol. 7, n° 3, 1982), pp. 441-48.

Walker, Alice, 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens', *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (The Women's Press, London, 1984), pp. 231-43.

Weir, Lorraine, "'Fauna of Mirrors": The Poetry of Hébert and Atwood', *Ariel* (Vol. 10, n° 3, 1979), pp. 99-113.

Whitlock, Gillian, 'The Bush, the Barrack-Yard and the Clearing: "Colonial Realism" in the Sketches and Stories of Susanna Moodie, C.L.R. James and Henry Lawson', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Vol. 20, n° 1, 1985), pp. 36-48.

Whitlock, Gillian, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (Cassell, London, 2000).

Wylie, Herb, Andrews, Jennifer and Viau, Robert, 'Past Matters/ Choses du passé', Introduction, *Studies in Canadian Literature/ Études en littérature canadienne* (Vol. 27, n° 1, 2002), pp. 1-9.

Zecher, Carla, 'Elisabeth-Sainte and Aurélie-Sorcière: The Mistress of Kamouraska and Her Double', *Québec Studies* (n° 20, 1995), pp. 11-18.

