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**Androgyny and the Idea of the Double:
Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman***

Too seldom are the links between *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood's first published novel, and her later novels acknowledged. Where the later novels seem primarily psychological studies with roots in the social milieu, *The Edible Woman* is too often treated as social criticism with characters verging on caricature.¹ However, this first work, like the later novels (in particular *Surfacing*), depicts the inward journey of the main character, her plunge into the madness within and her confrontation with the diffusion and multiplicity of personality—though this theme is viewed in a more comic light in *The Edible Woman* than in the novel which was to follow.

Marian's eating problem in *The Edible Woman*, probably because of its link to the title and much of the imagery of the novel, has attracted so much attention as a critique of our consumer society that we have often overlooked the fact that her eating disorder is a symptom, a result of Marian's psychological disturbance at the opening of the novel. As *The Edible Woman* begins, Marian feels she is at a dead end in her life. She knows her home situation—in itself unsatisfactory because of her nosy landlady—is about to break up because of the pregnancy Ainsley plans. As a result, she (and Ainsley) have allowed dirt to take over their apartment. She knows there is no future for her at Seymour Surveys because she is a woman: "What . . . could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys? I couldn't become one of the men upstairs . . ." ² Finally, she is involved with a man she clearly does not love and whom she views with ironic though indulgent distance. Moreover, before her engagement to Peter, when matrimony first occurs to her as a possibility, she feels only panic (72). Obviously, Marian should move out of her apartment, look for a better, more promising job, and end her relationship with Peter. However, Marian "solves" her problem differently: she gets engaged to Peter. As Marian herself puts it, she has thereby "contracted out" (158). Thus, she will

effortlessly leave her job and her apartment without facing the anxiety of freedom, uncertainty, and new beginnings. Instead of acting positively, Marian embraces passivity, turns over decision-making to Peter, and becomes a sort of somnambulist.

Clearly, Marian's decision to marry Peter is a mistake and subconsciously Marian knows this, though she is unable to act upon this knowledge. Her subconscious awareness is reflected in the eating disorder which she develops. However, by Part Three, the final pages of the novel, Marian has come to terms with her situation: having broken off her engagement with Peter, she is cleaning her apartment (now to be hers alone, it would seem) and she is about to seek a new job (284). Somehow, her experiences in Part Two have given her the strength to take control of her life. It is Duncan who has empowered her to mold her future instead of just giving up, or going permanently mad.

In essence, Part Two of *The Edible Woman*, like the later chapters of *Surfacing*, depicts a descent into madness. Marian's breakdown already begins in Part One, marked by her bizarre behaviour, for example, of hiding under Len's bed (77). But the shift from first person to third person narration more clearly reflects Marian's psychic disintegration and the splitting of her personality under the pressures the situation has exerted on her ego.

Conventionally seen as a foil to Peter, Duncan *is* his opposite in a number of ways.³ But more important is his role as a projection of Marian's self. In a seminal essay on the idea of the double, Claire Rosenfield explains that, although *Doppelgänger*s have long appeared in literature, "Not until Freud revealed the importance of the irrational in man have we been willing to admit the possibility that each of us has within us a second or a shadow self dwelling beneath the eminently civilized, eminently rational self, a Double who may at any time assert its anti-social tendencies."⁴ Such is Duncan's relation to Marian.

Marian's reliability as a narrating point of view is called in doubt in Part Two of the novel, and, indeed, Duncan's very existence outside of Marian's consciousness is itself questionable. Marian herself prepares us for the splitting of her personality when she sees the pregnant Clara as "several people, a cluster of hidden personalities that she didn't know at all" (117-18). Before examining what Duncan's appearance as a hidden personality within Marian reveals about her, let us look at the evidence which makes Duncan's "real" existence questionable and reveals him as Marian's double, a symptom of her mental breakdown and escape from reality.⁵

Throughout the novel, Marian feels her identity threatened by instability and formlessness. When Duncan tells Marian his room-

mates think he's mad, Marian feels that "all this talking, this rather liquid confessing, was something I didn't think I could ever bring myself to do. It seemed foolhardy to me, like an uncooked egg deciding to come out of its shell: there would be a risk of spreading out too far, turning into a formless puddle" (101). Marian describes a dream "in which I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent. I had started towards the mirror to see what was happening to my face, but at that point I woke up" (43).

Mirrors are images conventionally associated with double selves. When Marian sees in the bathtub taps multiple reflections of herself, "All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (224). In a panic, she reacts by calling Duncan to invite him to Peter's party she is about to attend. At the party she looks at herself in a mirror and asks, "What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?" (235). She feels the impulse to turn the mirror to the wall. Clearly, Marian is threatened by a loss of self, a diffusion, a splitting, which she fears irreversible. Note that in breaking into Marian's consciousness, Duncan, we are told, has broken the mirror in his apartment (142).

Much like Alice plunging into Wonderland—significantly alluded to in *The Edible Woman*—Marian feels dizzy in her first encounter with Duncan (49), an encounter tagged as a descent into the irrational world of illogic by the number six on Duncan's apartment which should logically be numbered apartment one. This descent takes place, however, in chapter six of the novel, thus dizzying the reader by confusing the relationship between reality and wonderland, our world and Marian's, her everyday world and her world with Duncan. When she returns from her first meeting with Duncan in his underworld, otherworld, apartment, she finds in the sunlight what she has written in his apartment almost indecipherable, "a blur of grey scribbling" (55). During that first interview with Duncan, Marian twice implies that the meeting is imaginary. Twice she contrasts this Moose Beer interview with what she refers to as "real" ones (52, 54). At the deepest part of her plunge into this wonderland of the self—just before Marian resurfaces to the rational world and to Part Three of the novel again narrated from the first person singular—Marian and Duncan descend to a ravine in the city "narrow and deep" (268). There in the snow they are "as near as possible to nothing" (271).

Duncan's very existence is continually called into question throughout *The Edible Woman*. Only Fish and Trevor, a part of Duncan's

wonderland—though Marian wonders if they are imaginary (50) — act in the real world of the novel: they come to Peter's party and Fish marries Ainsley. Duncan, who himself admits his lack of a birth certificate (208), is never seen by any of the main characters of the novel besides Marian, and he and Marian are unable to coexist in the real world. When Duncan refuses to enter Peter's apartment for his first meeting with the people inhabiting Marian's reality, he explains to her: "One of us would be sure to evaporate, it would probably be me ..." (246). Duncan often seems to turn up by chance wherever Marian goes "automatically, as though she was trailing somebody by an instinct" (138-39), be it a park—where Duncan tells Marian he has been expecting her (176) on a cold snowy night—or be it a darkened movie theatre.

The scene in the theatre most fully emphasizes Duncan's tenuous reality. Marian tells us that when he "suddenly materialized" she felt an "irrational gladness" (127-28). She fears that if she were to touch him "her hand would encounter only darkness and emptiness or the plush surface of movie-theatre upholstery" (128). After he materializes, he disappears and Marian feels, "Well, he had gone then, or perhaps he had never been there in the first place; or maybe it had been somebody else" (128). When he appears one more time it is to whisper uncannily in her ear the answer to the unspoken question in her mind (what's he making the cracking sound with? pumpkin seeds). He's also read her mind earlier, at the laundromat, when he had known she had forgotten her soap (95). When Duncan again disappears from the movie theatre, Marian's response is matter-of-fact: "So I'm finally going mad . . ." (129). When Marian is to part from Duncan finally to confront Peter and reality, she notes to herself that Peter is "real" (264). Duncan is happy to be rid of her. He explains, "I want to go back to my shell. I've had enough of so-called reality for now" (265). Indeed, when she leaves him and looks back, she expects him to have evaporated (272).

It is important to see not only Duncan's questionable reality but also his status as a double, a mirror self, of Marian. We are told Duncan has no shell; he's "exposed," that is, set free, externalized, from Marian's self. In a symbolic rather than a sexual gesture, Duncan and Marian wordlessly kiss and then march away from each other like, we are pointedly told, "dogs on magnets" (103), symmetrical mirror images: "We both stopped kissing at the same time, and stepped back. We looked at each other for another minute. Then we picked up our laundry bags, slung them over our shoulders, turned around, and marched away in opposite directions" (103). Just afterwards, Marian refers to her interaction with Duncan as "a kind of lapse, a blank in the

ego, like amnesia" (106). Further to stress this interpretation of Duncan's relationship to Marian, Atwood has Duncan claim to be a "changeling." He says "I'm not human at all, I come from the underground" (144). In a classic *Doppelgänger* episode, Marian dons Duncan's dressing gown while he is ironing her blouse and he notes, "You look sort of like me in that" (118). Their physical similarity is again emphasized when Marian's makeup for Peter's party makes her look "egyptianlidded" (228), like the museum mummy Duncan resembles (192). Perhaps the reason Duncan looks so thin, like a mummified skeleton (193), is that Marian isn't eating; as a symptom of her breakdown she is trying to starve the rebellious Duncan part of herself to death (158, 176).

But what exactly does it mean that Marian has a breakdown during which she discovers a shadow self, and how does this shadow self—Duncan—enable her to take control of and redirect her life by the end of the novel when she was unable to do so in Part One of the work? In essence, the question that needs answering is: what causes Marian's breakdown? Why, in fairly ordinary circumstances, does she quite literally fall apart, go to pieces?

Essentially, Marian's crisis is created by society's gender conventions. The link between Marian's femininity, her madness, and the appearance of Duncan is symbolically made when Marian finds herself doodling moons—and then drawing a black moon, the dark underside of the ordinary moon. Marian can see no acceptable conventional roles for herself in society: she is trying very hard to be conventional, to be one of those ordinary moons, to deny the dark underside of her personality, the parts that don't fit in. Her women friends and acquaintances embody, indeed almost parody, traditional female roles in which Marian finds no satisfactory place for herself.

The office virgins represent the pathetic situation of working in a dead end traditionally female job and of living in the desperate hope of capturing and thus being rescued by a man. Lucy is so desperate for a man that she makes a pass at Peter during the party celebrating his engagement to Marian (244). The office virgins' major strategy in life is passivity and "feminine" repression of self. Like Marian, Millie was bothered about the pension plan at Seymour Surveys but her advice to Marian is to forget about complaining: "You'll get over it" (23), she says.

Clara represents no better role model for Marian. She is fulfilling the conventional married woman's role, having given up her intellectual promise in favour of husband and family. Though Clara good-naturedly accepts her situation as wife and mother, Marian is repelled by Clara's life and can barely bring herself to visit Clara.

Her surface rebelliousness notwithstanding, Ainsley also enacts only traditional women's roles. She too, like the office virgins, hunts men, not to marry them but to mate with them in order to become pregnant. Though unwed motherhood in the context of *The Edible Woman* seems avant-garde and daringly different, Ainsley's motives and view of women's roles are complicit with a traditional definition of women's place in and contribution to society. She explains, "Every woman should have at least one baby . . . It's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity" (40). Ultimately, her frantic search for a husband to serve as father-figure for her unborn child, which she revealingly assumes will be a son, exposes her conventionality.

Marian is dissatisfied with all the possibilities she envisions and when she has what all the other women around her sought or still seek, a man, she finds herself still dissatisfied. The roles, like the clothes society offers, seem to her to camouflage her real self (12). As part of Marian's attempt to be a model woman, a "lady," she struggles to be selfless, to avoid admitting "selfish" needs and desires. Service is supposed to be a woman's highest calling and Marian's engagement to Peter is one expression of Marian's attempt to devote herself to this role. Rather than helping her to fulfill herself, her engagement to Peter increasingly requires that she deny and repress herself. She knows that to marry him, symbolically to be captured by his camera/gun, would freeze her ". . . indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (252).

In response to this seemingly hopeless situation, Marian's subconscious brings Duncan into being. Unlike the other women who are able to embrace traditional female roles, Marian has a rebellious self within, which prevents her quiet rational submission. Up until this point, Marian has but slenderly known this part of herself. Indeed, when she asks Duncan where he is from, he responds, "You've never heard of it" (100). Until Duncan's appearance, Marian has been, as Clara points out, "abnormally normal" (211). For Marian, this has included extraordinary concern with social conventionality, with fitting in.

Marian is exceedingly self-conscious and fearful of appearing different. When Duncan accuses her of looking exposed, she nervously checks her seams and zippers (95). And it is Marian who contends with the landlady by lying politely and smoothing over Ainsley's behaviour. Marian is always very polite, even when her courteous remarks are transparently dishonest. For example, Clara immediately sees through Marian's statement that Joe is a wonderful husband, a statement

Marian never for a moment believes but which she seems to feel the etiquette of the conversation calls for.

Only late in the novel, after setting Duncan free, does Marian become aware of her previous falseness to herself and realize that she had been "... closed in a sodden formless unhappiness that seemed now to have been clogging her mind for a long time..." (225). Duncan gives Marian the distance to judge her society—"The price of [his] version of reality was testing the other one" (279)—and he helps Marian envision non-traditional possibilities.

Rosenfield points out that the idea of the double has its origin in the desire for immortality and the fear of death. Marian's engagement to Peter and, indeed, her frantic identification with the passive role society offers women, threaten Marian with loss of self: enter Duncan.

Frightened by the possible destruction of his ego and the loss of his individuality in death, primitive man created a body-soul which he located in his shadow or his reflection, and which he deemed immortal.... Though his body would die and disintegrate—as had the bodies of the dead he had seen—his soul would survive as his shadow or Double.⁶

But... modern literature presents the Double as a symbol not of eternal life but of death, a representation which anticipates the division of the personality into two opposing forces, and a subsequent loss of a sense of identity and continuity in time.⁷

This association of the double with both death and immortality illuminates Duncan's identification with the Egyptian mummy in the museum he visits with Marian. Like the mummy, Duncan offers Marian a means of surviving ego destruction, the symbolic death Peter brings. However, Duncan's appearance, as the externalization of Marian's descent into madness, threatens Marian with permanent madness, a kind of ego death, also symbolized by the mummified corpse.

Duncan's example leads Marian along the former route, allowing her to survive the threat of ego destruction. His unconventionality teaches Marian to be herself and to admit to her own needs. At first, while Duncan openly discusses pubic hairs at the laundromat, Marian can only worry that others will overhear. Duncan, who never makes polite conversation, does not worry about what others think and never seems self-conscious about his eccentric behaviour. "I've got my own private mirror. One I can trust, I know what's in it. It's just public ones that I don't like" (143). In contrast, until she meets Duncan, Marian trust only public mirrors, for she has no sense of self. Duncan teaches Marian to assert her own needs rather than hide her ego beneath conventional female roles requiring women to serve solely as mirrors for men while effacing themselves.

At first, Marian repeatedly tries to patronize, pity, or humour Duncan, to relate to him as a nurse or mother, to serve him and focus on his needs while entirely suppressing her own. Duncan ridicules and unmasks such behaviour, disallowing Marian this ego escape. Marian can only justify to herself her relationship to Duncan on the basis of his need for her. When she has left Peter's party to seek out Duncan, she tells him she's done so because he needs her more than does Peter (254). Both she and Duncan are aware she is lying; she is still unable to admit doing something for her own benefit, to fulfill her own needs. When Duncan offers the more plausible explanation that Marian has come to him for help, to be rescued, she changes the topic: " 'Oh, let's not talk about rescuing,' Marian said desperately" (254).

Ultimately, Duncan forces Marian to act as his equal, making her acknowledge both his identity and her own. Thus, they are only able to make love when Marian stops mothering Duncan. In a sense, as Duncan suggests, Marian can only become real once she and Duncan have gone to bed together (207). And only after this can Duncan force Marian to focus on her own needs, admit she has a problem, and ask for help.

Duncan spoke into the silence. "So why can't you go back? I mean, you are getting married and so on. I thought you were the capable type."

"I am," she said unhappily. "I was. I don't know." She didn't want to discuss it.

"Some would say of course that it's all in your mind."

"I know that," she said, impatient: she wasn't a total idiot yet. "But how do I get it out?" (270)

Through her relationship with Duncan, Marian begins to see value in herself and even the smallest gesture of Duncan-like self-assertive unconcern for the opinion of others proves psychologically meaningful and liberating. "In a spirit approaching gay rebellion Marian neglected to erase her bath-tub ring" (274). Baking the cake for Peter, she offers him a substitute for herself, for she will no longer passively allow the destruction of her ego (279).

Duncan's example teaches Marian to value herself and attend to her needs and desires; this is but one aspect of the way his example allows her to begin to break free of the prison of gender. Atwood creatively exploits the idea of the double in giving Marian a *male* shadow self.

The Edible Woman, like *Alice in Wonderland* as Fish points out, is a sexual identity crisis book (199). Marian, like Alice, is "trying to find her role . . . as a Woman One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them . . ." (199). The only person, other than Duncan, with whom Marian identifies is also a

man, the Underwear Man who makes obscene phone calls but who, Marian is sure, is a split personality, a "sex-fiend" who is simultaneously a "very nice normal" person (119). Marian sees in him what she is unable at first to see in herself: "a victim of society" (120). In a sense, Peter and Ainsley are right when they accuse Marian of rejecting her femininity (82, 280), at least as society defines that femininity. Duncan's very presence as a male externalization of part of Marian undermines conventional definitions of gender and sexual roles. Atwood presents the ego as androgynous.

Duncan himself sees through and mocks society's rigid gender definition. At her first encounter with Duncan, Marian questions him about the Moose Beer advertisement, giving Duncan the occasion to ridicule the machismo myth of rugged manliness used to sell beer and to limit one's freedom. He says the advertisement's phrase "deep-down manly flavour," for example, reminds him of "Sweat . . . Canvas gym shoes. Underground locker-rooms and jock-straps" (52). When Duncan and Marian get into bed together Duncan sardonically mocks traditional expectations society places on the man: "I guess now I'm supposed to crush you in my manly arms" (260). And once his arms are around Marian his 'romantic' comment is " 'You smell funny' " (260). Recall that Duncan wishes to be an amoeba, a creature he praises for being ". . . immortal . . . and sort of shapeless and flexible" (206-07). Significantly, the amoeba is not limited by the rigid duality of gender definition. Furthermore, the gender identity of the mummy associated with Duncan is ambiguous. Marian immediately assumes it is female, perhaps because it is beautiful, but Duncan introduces the indefiniteness of gender identity: " 'I think it's supposed to be a man' " (192).

More thoroughly to undercut and call in doubt society's assignment of male/female roles, Atwood associates Duncan, the male shadow of Marian, with typically female roles. Duncan is unconcerned with fitting into society's roles for "normal" men. He spends his time at laundromats, washing and drying clothes, and he works off tension by ironing. He is seen as childlike but it would be more accurate to see him as "effeminate": women are traditionally treated and taught to act like children in interactions with men.

By his example, by recognizing the "male" within the "female" (Duncan in Marian) and the "female" within that "male" (the washer/ironer in Duncan), Marian is empowered to recognize the falsifications and reject the constrictions of society's gender roles. In one of her early meetings with Duncan, Marian self-consciously allows herself the freedom to be comfortable and sit in what she refers to as "not a lady-like position" (126). Ultimately, by having sexual relations with

Duncan, Marian can accept sexuality without traditional roles and role playing, and, more importantly, can heal the breach within herself, unite with Duncan and return—however reluctantly—to reality, able to think of herself in the first person singular again (284) and to act rather than submit. She has discovered inner resources and possibilities of which she was formerly unaware.

Duncan's example gives her the courage to be unconventional, "abnormal." When Marian has sex with Peter, in the bathtub she associates with a coffin (61), her arm is ground painfully into the porcelain and she blots the entire unpleasant experience from her mind but when Peter asks, "How was it for you?", she answers, "Marvelous" (63). Duncan says what Marian can only think. After they have sex, she asks him the same question, "How was it for you last night?" His telling response is "How was what? Oh. That" (271). By means of Duncan's example, Marian not only learns about herself but learns to be herself.

When Alice considered returning from Wonderland she says, "It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying 'Come up again dear!' I shall only look up and say 'Who am I, then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else.'" ⁸ Marian decides to come up because, unlike when she descended, she has decided she likes being, in part, that somebody else. By the end of the novel she has broken with Peter and her job (284), going against society's conventional wisdom while, at the same time, still finding herself "delicious" (287). If the cake Marian bakes represents her self, her identity, then it is only just and logical that she and Duncan both partake of it in a ritual celebrating their joint harmonious cohabitation in that newly self-aware, self-reconciled, identity.

In so far as the hero does return from the underworld of his being and is able to use his new knowledge The Double novel reveals not a disintegration of the personality but a reintegration, a recognition of the necessary balance between order and freedom.⁹

Duncan makes Marian recognize how fully she has internalized society's gender roles and how artificial and stifling those roles can be. At one point in their relationship, Duncan and Marian walk up to a door and Marian says, "I paused for an instant at the entrance, but he made no move to open the door for me so I opened it myself" (102). Essentially, Duncan, as an acknowledged part of Marian, her free, unconventional self, allows Marian to realize that in the future she will be able to open doors for herself.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Francis Mansbridge, "Search for Self in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 22 (1978), 106-17; Perry Nodelman, "Trusting the Untrustworthy," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 21 (1977/78), 73-82; Sheila Page, "Supermarket Survival: A Critical Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*," *The Sphinx* 1 (1974), 9-19.
2. Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (New York: Popular Library, 1969), p. 19. Subsequent references are to this edition.
3. See, for example, Margaret Griffith, "Verbal Terrain in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Critique* 21 (1974), 85-93; T. D. MacLulich, "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale: Levi-Strauss, Bettelheim, and *The Edible Woman*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 11 (1978), 111-29; Jane Rule, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy: The Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Malahat Review* 41 (1977), 42-49.
4. Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double," *Daedalus*, 92 (1963), 326. For other discussions of the double, less helpful in this context, see Albert J. Guerard, "Concepts of the Double" in *Stories of the Double* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1967); C.F. Keppler, *The Literature of the Second Self* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1972); Otto Rank, "The Double as Immortal Self" in *Beyond Psychology* (1941; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958); Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).
5. The possibility that Duncan is a *Doppelgänger* is raised but not pursued in Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1980), p. 93.
6. Rosenfield, 326-27.
7. Rosenfield, 327.
8. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1897; reprint ed., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 17.
9. Rosenfield, 333.