The Doctor and the Murderess: A Discussion of Knowledge and Ignorance in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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Abstract
Grace Marks was a convicted double murderer in nineteenth-century Canada. Her case was well known at the time thanks to its sensationally violent and sexual details. The novel *Alias Grace* (1997) by Margaret Atwood engages in a discussion about the relationship between fact and fiction, scientific objectivity and power. This article analyses the relationship between Atwood's fictional Grace Marks and Dr Simon Jordan, an American doctor who visits her in prison hoping to find out the truth about Grace and the murders. Both Grace and Dr Jordan are formed by the existing norms of the time period, norms which govern how men and women of their particular class should act. However, what makes their meetings noteworthy is that Grace Marks possesses knowledge of the norms and expectations and can therefore use them to her advantage, whereas Dr Jordan does not, despite being an educated and professional man. In the end, this leads to Grace's ability to tell her own story, and Dr Jordan's failure as a man of science.

Keywords: gender; fact; fiction; science; knowledge; power

Grace Marks was a convicted double murderer in nineteenth-century Canada. Her case was well known at the time thanks to its sensationally violent and sexual details. Allegedly, together with her lover James McDermott, Grace Marks murdered her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper—and possible mistress—Nancy Montgomery in 1843. Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1997a) tells this story, but as Atwood herself has stated, '*Alias Grace* is very much a novel rather than a documentary' (1997b: 1515). The novel does not therefore belong to the True Crime genre and should be regarded as pure fiction. Although a novel about crime, it is in a way, as Hilde Staels (2000: 432) points out, an antidetective novel, as the narrative does not supply the reader with any

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conclusion regarding her guilt. Nevertheless, the novel vividly engages in a discussion about the relationship between fact and fiction, scientific objectivity and power.

This article analyses the relationship between Atwood’s fictional Grace Marks and Dr. Simon Jordan, an American doctor who visits her in prison hoping to find out the truth (facts) about Grace and the murders. Grace Marks had previously been locked up in a lunatic asylum, and when Dr. Jordan meets her, she claims to suffer from amnesia. Dr. Jordan is interested in nervous and cerebral diseases of criminals, hoping to one day run his own asylum, and he sees the mind as unexplored territory. Yet he continuously fills that blank space, that territory, with his own ideas and notions, far from medically and scientifically accurate. Both Grace and Dr. Jordan are formed by the existing norms of the time period, norms which govern how men and women of their particular class should act. However, what makes their meetings noteworthy, is that Grace Marks possesses knowledge of the norms and expectations and can therefore use them to her advantage, whereas Dr. Jordan does not, despite being an educated and professional man. In the end, this leads to Grace’s ability to tell her own story, and Dr. Jordan’s failure as a man of science.

Grace Marks: Fact and fiction

In several ways the framework of the novel *Alias Grace* has a literary contextualisation as well as a historically criminological one, thus stressing narration and storytelling. A number of literary epigraphs open each chapter, from authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Alfred Tennyson, and Robert Browning. André Brink regards the use of these epigraphs as a means to make the reader aware of an entrance into ‘a textualized and storified world’ (1998: 34). The actual text references writers such as Walter Scott and Susanna Moodie. Moodie authored *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), describing her experiences as a pioneer settler in Canada. She also met the real Grace Marks, so her retellings of their meetings have also been used by Atwood in order to understand, or categorise, Grace Marks. As Atwood put it:

> Moodie describes Grace Marks as the driving engine of the affair—a scowling, sullen teenage temptress—with the co-murderer, the manservant James McDermott, shown as a mere dupe, driven on by his own lust for Grace, as well as by her taunts and blandishments. (1997b: 1513)

In the novel, too, Moodie is dismissed as unreliable. It is claimed that she is too influenced by romantic fiction, and that she is 'prone to embroidery' (1997a: 191). In addition to the literary references, Atwood includes extracts from newspaper articles and reports from the trial on the fate of Grace Marks. This could be considered as factual reporting, and not as fiction; however, as Hilde Staels points out, 'Atwood's intention may be to reinforce the idea underlying the novel that history and fiction are both discursive constructs' (2000: 431). Indeed, as has been noted by other scholars, there is undoubtedly a focus on fact, fiction and narration both as a type of frame for the novel and as part of the theme and characterisation of Grace Marks. For this reason, critics have termed this novel historiographic or postmodern metafiction (Ingersoll 2001; Niederhoff 2000), while others have pointed out the heteroglossic nature of the story and its characters (Gregersdotter 2003; March 1997). Nevertheless, *Alias Grace* is not just emphasising the constructedness of history and fiction, but in addition the constructedness of madness following the attributes of gender and class, and how rationality and scientific thought can be equally formed by the societal and cultural context.

In the novel, ideas of how men and women should act are governed, first and foremost, by contemporary Victorian culture and society. As Jeanette King (2005: 72) explains, despite the Canadian setting, British Victorian values and norms are paramount. Michel Foucault, among others, has argued that during this era the view on sexuality transformed from being 'quite lax' into an issue to be kept hidden and totally silenced (1998: 3). Yet, as Foucault also maintains, and as *Alias Grace* demonstrates, the era was simultaneously developing an immense interest in sex and sexuality: sexuality was critically examined and discussed in various disciplines, such as medicine and law.

Similarly, society, as Judith Flanders claims in *The Invention of Murder* (2011), nurtured an almost morbid fascination with crime, particularly murder and scandal, with gory details explicitly described. The media was consequently engaged in a hypocritical fashion in the reporting of crimes and the condemnation of criminals, and yet displaying pure fascination in doing so. Atwood's novel recaptures this atmosphere through newspaper clippings where the attitudes to gender, sex, and class are revealed, and how those categories are linked to, and perhaps lead to, crime. When Grace Mark's alleged co-conspirator, James McDermott, is executed, a great number of spectators have gathered to watch him take his last breath. This was not an unusual form of entertainment, according to Flanders (53). One reporter in the 23 November 1843 issue of *The Toronto Mirror* focuses on the women in the crowd and writes: ‘What kinds of feelings those women can possess who flocked from far and near through mud and rain to be present at the horrid spectacle, we cannot divine. We venture to say they were not very delicate or refined’ (quoted in Atwood 1997a: 9). The women have braved bad weather to watch McDermott die, and regardless of the normality of witnessing an execution, the morals and characters of the women are questionable; they have removed themselves far from the image of women as Victorian angels in the house, because ‘they wanted to breathe death in like fine perfume’ (1997a: 28).

In the same speculative way, the media plays a great part in the recreation of Grace as a fictional character and therefore affects her life destiny. Grace tells the reader:

> I think of all the things that have been written about me—that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, [...] that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, [...] that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (1997a: 23)

Although the judgments differ and even contradict each other, what Grace comments on here is not that she has been given a multidimensional and complex character by the press, but instead that they invest in discourse concerning her class and sexuality. An uneducated woman is more prone to sin; she is, as Grace says, ‘little better than an idiot’.

An interest in true crime is evident within the household in which Grace works when she is allowed out of prison from time to time. Grace’s mistress, the governor’s wife, even keeps a book with clippings about true crimes. Grace’s story is something that beats the tales of crimes in the clippings book; she is a ‘celebrated murderess’ (1997a: 22), causing the women who visit the governor’s wife to ‘stare without appearing to, out from under their bonnets’ (1997a: 22), when she enters a room. Thus, Grace is surrounded by stories about her, and before meeting Dr. Jordan, she lacks the power to influence them.

It is obvious that Dr. Jordan and other men, in a similar fashion to the media, want to see her as a highly sexual or vulnerable person, or as an 'accomplished actress and a most practiced liar […] as devoid of morals as she is of scruples' (1997a: 71), as Dr. Bannerling tells Dr. Jordan. In comparison, several women choose to see her as being romantic, with a somewhat tragic twist to her character. Grace comments:

> Miss Lydia tells me I am a romantic figure […] But if I laughed out loud I might not be able to stop; and also it would spoil their romantic notion of me. Romantic people are not supposed to laugh, I know that much from looking at the pictures. (1997a: 25)

However, this example is just one amongst many throughout the narrative that suggest that Grace possesses great knowledge of the stories about herself and their, often inconsistent, features. This is partly because she has been subjected to them many times, admitting that she is 'skilled at overhearing' (1997a: 5), and partly because she has had a friend, Mary Whitney, who up until her death used to share her experiences and opinions about what must be regarded as political matters: gender, class and sexuality. Grace takes advantage of this knowledge in her meetings with Dr. Jordan, and can therefore make herself more fluid and less fixed as a subject.

Sex, gender and science

Albeit mostly unaware of it, Dr. Jordan, as much as Grace, is shaped by the prevailing norms and subsequent demands made on him by being an unmarried, educated man. King notes that he 'represents the power of the male medical profession over women' (2005: 74). He is depicted to be in good company with the rest of the educated and enlightened men in the novel. They may mock Susannah Moodie and her emotionality, as mentioned above, but the fact is that they, too, are highly influenced by literary, romantic conventions. For example, in conversation, they often refer to and quote authors and poets such as Hawthorne and Wordsworth. Indeed, as King claims, during the Victorian era, '[t]here was little attempt to keep science, literature and theology in different compartments; they shared a common discourse' (2005: 9). Despite his medical education and profession, Dr. Jordan lacks the knowledge that these discourses are blurred, and he does not see himself as someone who is shaped by the cultural conventions. He believes he can compartmentalize, especially in his scientific, professional role, and particularly in comparison to the women, who are ‘not only physically weaker, but also intellectually’ (2005: 13). This ignorance is visible in his meetings with Grace, and also when he meets other women.

Dr. Jordan is filled with biased notions of his patient, before he even meets her. He has been ‘amply warned’ (Atwood 1997a: 71) by Dr. Bannerling, who met Grace when she was at the asylum, that she is a skilled liar. However, as much as Grace Marks might be performing, Dr. Jordan is eager to present himself as an ‘image of goodwill’, ‘with a calm and smiling face’ (59) to make her feel safe in his presence. Their first meeting is marked both by this ‘goodwill’ and by the intruding preconceived ideas about her, that slip into the room as soon as he enters. Before the meeting, he has seen an engraving of her and read the confession she gave at the trial. When he enters the room, he does so as a superior human being in all respects. He is an educated man of science. When he sees her standing in the corner, he is stripped of his professionalism and his mind rushes from images of nuns and virgin maidens waiting to be rescued, to a scared, presumably mad young woman, clad only in a nightgown, with her hair visible. His desire to find a hysteric is fulfilled; she reminds him of the hysterical women he has met at the asylum in Paris (59). However, she steps forward, and ‘the woman he’d seen the instant before was suddenly no longer there’ (59). Thinking back on this event, Simon Jordan realises he was influenced by ‘[i]magination and fancy’ and he warns himself that he ‘must stick to observation’, and ‘resist melodrama, and an overheated brain’ (60). Imagination overall was seen as threatening to a man of science, the opposite to reason (Daston and Galison 2007: 223), and Dr. Jordan struggles to return to the role of the objective and scientific professional. The Grace Marks he sees before him is the opposite of his first impression; she is ‘straighter, taller, more self-possessed’ (Atwood 1997a: 59), and she is also fully dressed, with her hair hidden under a white cap. His visions of a sexually overt woman or a woman in need of rescuing are shattered. That Dr. Jordan is interested in Grace Marks as a sexual being at times overshadows his reasons for being there in the first place. He does have a desire to dig deep into Grace’s psyche, to cure her alleged amnesia, to truly understand her; but as King (2005: 74) points out, he also has a great desire to penetrate her body, to know her sexually. This does not make him exceptional in Grace's eyes, who has had other encounters with men of science, Dr. Bannerling, among others.

The public, as Grace notices, was more interested in whether she has been the lover of James McDermott than if had she been part of the murders: 'Were you noisy Grace […] Did you squeal and moan, did you wiggle underneath that swarthy little rat' (Atwood 1997a: 63). The public's sexual curiosity mirrors the sexualised double standards of Victorian society highlighted in her confessional meeting with the chaplain. The fact that Grace Marks has also spent time in an asylum, in the Victorian Canadian context, means she might be more inclined to engage in sexual activities. It was, according to Foucault, in such places, as well as brothels, that 'untrammelled sex' would exist, 'quietly authorized', in Victorian opinion (Foucault 1998: 4). Foucault argues that the confession has been established 'as one of the main rituals' that are relied on 'for the production of truth' (1998: 58). Moreover, a confessional situation 'unfolds within a power relationship' (1998: 61); there is an authority who demands it, and this authority has the power to 'judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile' (1998: 61–62). Atwood's example of a confessional situation with the chaplain soon moves from a promise of forgiveness to the subject of sex:

> Oh come to my arms, poor wandering soul. […] Describe how conscience tortures you day and night […] Shed tears of remorse. Let me forgive and pity […] And then what did he do? Oh shocking. And then what? The left hand or the right? How far up, exactly? Show me where. (1997a: 35)

These comments, retold by Grace, all underline the interest in a (fallen) woman's sexuality. She should resist sexual temptation and yet engage in it, because it makes a titillating and scandalous story. Considering the power relationship and production of truth, a conversation between patient and doctor resembles the confession in many ways. Using her acquired knowledge from the confession she was forced to participate in, Grace Marks can utilize Dr. Jordan's sexual interest in her to create an ambivalence and ambiguity about her persona, and can resist the power relationship. She recaptures parts of her life story where she plays the part of the victim from the hands of men who want to have sexual knowledge about her, but concurrently she opens up enough for the interpretation to be made that she herself has been sexually active.

Taking pride in his professionalism, Dr. Jordan will not physically touch her. His interest is 'purely scientific' (Atwood 1997a: 41). It is only once when he openly slips, and thus echoes the Chaplain, when he asks, 'Did he put his hands inside your clothing?' and 'Were you lying down?' (308). However, he brings Grace fruits and vegetables to induce her to talk about the double murder, thinking that the gift of root vegetables will encourage her to talk about the dead bodies that were found in the cellar of the Kinnear household. Furthermore, by bringing her this produce, he deliberately places himself in closer proximity to her. Grace is depicted as understanding the double motive in his scientific, psychoanalytical approach, and his strictly emotional, even erotic, approach. When he brings her an apple, she first uses her 'stupid look'. 'I have a good stupid look which I have practiced', the reader is told (38). She uses this look because she is aware that Dr. Jordan wants her to discuss Adam and Eve, the apple of knowledge, and sin. Atwood writes: 'I look at him. I look away. I look at him again. I hold the apple in my two hands. He waits. Finally I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead' (42). By holding the apple, Grace also holds the knowledge in her own hands, and the knowledge includes her story, the 'truth' Dr. Jordan wants possession of, and the knowledge that leads to sin, as the Old Testament claims. The apple against the forehead may also be an echo of her opinions about her incarceration at the lunatic asylum, whose staff 'wouldn't know mad when they saw it', and most women there 'were no madder than the Queen of England' (31). Margaret Rogerson comments on the apple scene: 'Her behaviour could signal madness, but remains ambiguous because it can also be interpreted as sexual flirtation' (1998: 18). In other words, Grace communicates a possession of knowledge and the need for rescuing while simultaneously flaunting her sexuality. Her actions are therefore reasonable, when regarding her knowledge and experiences.

Indeed, her dialogues with Dr. Jordan are marked by her knowledge of, and toying with, Victorian double standards: the blurring of two separate gendered identities which are the guilty, sinful woman of the lower class and the innocent decent woman. One result of Grace's ambiguous behaviour and the stories that she tells him is that Dr. Jordan becomes unable to attach a label to her. Therefore, he is emotionally and psychologically drawn between conflicting images and ideas of her, rendering him mentally unstable.

Grace's knowledge

The stories Grace shares with Dr. Jordan are possible to tell because she has knowledge of Victorian narratives, a knowledge which partly comes from her dead friend Mary Whitney, and partly from experience. Many times, she thinks about how people regard her, but lacks the power to voice her side of the story. When at the asylum, she starts to scream, and is naturally seen as a hysteric. She screams due to previous experiences, however. She has been abused by doctors, and when seeing a new doctor, who is also carrying a knife, she screams because she is frightened (Atwood 1997a: 29–30). As Jane M. Ussher claims, the difficult woman during the nineteenth century was automatically labelled a hysteric (2017: 76). She longs to become the 'wild beast' the newspapers call her, but she never acts on it (33). However, it is through stories about Mary Whitney that Grace can share her thoughts about her situation, and, indeed, about the plight of women in her time *per se*, and can also enhance her own ambiguity. On the subject of class and gender, Susanne Becker writes that Mary Whitney's offensive statements, as well as 'Grace's own sharp observations […], reveal [Atwood's] recognitions of recurring abuse and sexual entanglements' (1999: 272). However, compared to the times when she 'repeats' her friend Mary's words, 'Grace's own sharp observations' are always politely expressed, which, as already said, produces ambiguity. Grace admits, though not to Dr. Jordan, that 'without [Mary], it would have been a different story entirely' (Atwood 1997a: 102).

Grace's memories, thoughts, and conversations with Dr. Jordan are marked by the presence and influence of Mary Whitney. For example, Grace says, more than once, '[a]s Mary used to say…' (199), and '[…] which is the kind of thing Mary Whitney would have said, or so I told myself' (264). The last example illustrates the fact that Grace uses Mary's words even though she never even spoke them. She makes use of her friend's name when she escapes after the murders, and she continues to use Mary's name and words as a means to be simultaneously truthful and ambiguous. She even uses her name, or persona, in a situation which involves a (probably) fake session of hypnotism. It is quite possible to say that Mary Whitney is the reason why Grace can talk to Dr. Jordan at all. She claims that, 'after a time, I don't know how it was, but little by little I found I could talk to him more easily, and think up things to say' (68). Their conversations, and the foundations of them, are nevertheless complex. Yet the friendship with Mary Whitney becomes a source of knowledge and thus a way for her to form her own story, without Dr. Jordan comprehending the reversal of control.

Mary Whitney supplies Grace with ideas and opinions that critique conventions of Victorian narratives about gender. According to Grace, Mary was 'an outspoken young woman, and did not mince words; and she had very democratic ideas' (159). Grace often uses a mock-apologetic tone when she talks about Mary, such as when she claims that she was often 'astonished at the words that came out of her mouth' (150). She is never truly apologetic, however, since by citing Mary, Grace is not obliged to mince words either. She is free to use a language filled with sexual innuendo, she can criticise authorities, including Dr. Jordan, and she can, above all, comment on the situation of lower-class women. Mary Whitney becomes pregnant by a man of another class, and she dies because of it. This tragic event gives Grace further knowledge of women's powerlessness when it comes to their own bodies and choices. When Grace gets her first menstruation, Mary 'said that some called it Eve's curse but she thought that was stupid, and the real curse of Eve was having to put up with Adam, who as soon as there was any trouble, blamed it all on her' (164). As blasphemous as this might seem, the underlying implication here concerns the powerlessness of women of the time, understood in the novel as being caused by both rigid class distinctions and patriarchy's hold on women's agency. It is also at this time that Mary warns Grace about men. During these conversations, Dr. Jordan seems unable to include himself in either the category of men or that of the authorities. Grace thinks: 'He really does not know. […] In that way they are like children, they do not have to think ahead, or worry about the consequences of what they do. But it is not their fault, it is only how they are brought up' (214). Here it is implied that men do not have to be aware of the normative narratives because they are brought up that way, and also because, as men, they are born into a position of authority, and therefore they can remain ignorant.

Furthermore, with the knowledge she gains from Mary Whitney, Grace can make her own comments on Victorian narratives through her quilting. *Alias Grace* is divided into sections, and each carries the name of a quilting pattern. The image of the patchwork is a metaphor for the character of Grace, as well as for her stories, which become non-linear and materialise as a sharp contrast to Victorian ideas. Magali Cornier Michael asserts that the patchwork image results not in a sense of chaos, but in a 'deliberate and more spatial construction that functions as a dynamic, ever evolving whole while retaining the integrity of its separate pieces' (2001: 421). Quilting creates integrity as much as it tells the important stories of Grace's contemporary life and womanhood. It gives her a voice and, as Rogerson contends, 'quiltmaking, as a form of female discourse, empowers Grace to speak in a language that is not universally accessible. In particular, it enables her to withhold secrets from her male inquisitor' (1998: 6).

For instance, Grace says that one thing all quilts have in common is that the viewer can 'see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light' (Atwood 1997a: 162). This can be understood as a meta-comment; she deliberately remains ambiguous in her meetings with Dr. Jordan. It also ties in with her opinions about what has been told about her in the media and in court, for example. With her quilts, she can respond to the stories that have previously been told about her and give voice to, and visualise, her own stories. The duality Grace speaks of is also in line with Elaine Showalter's ideas about quilting and patchworks, where the pieces of various patterns are more than artwork, and are symbolic of a feminist politics (1991: 146) that is 'a series of aesthetic decisions that involve the transformation of conventions' (150).

The transformation of conventions is that this art form signals violence, for example. Hilary Mantel maintains that this division of the novel's parts could have been seen as a 'worn and dangerously cosy device' had the names been less haunting: 'There is peril here: Jagged Edge, Snake Fence. There is woman's fallibility, woman's fate: Broken Dishes, Secret Drawer, Rocky Road. There is destruction: Falling Timbers. And woman's primal guilt: Pandora's Box' (1996: 4). From one perspective, some of these names (such as Broken Dishes and Snake Fence) are aspects of Grace's history as a maid and later as a prisoner, and always as a woman.

Grace has been a quilt maker from a very young age and it is an area of expertise she uses both practically and metaphorically in her sessions with Dr. Jordan. Jordan asks what the pattern of a quilt created only for herself would look like. Grace thinks of the quilt called the Tree of Paradise and of the changes she would make to have it suit her wishes and purposes, but nevertheless she tells him: 'I don't know, Sir. Perhaps it would be a Job's Tears, or a Tree of Paradise, or a Snake Fence; or else an Old Maid's Puzzle, because I am an old maid, wouldn't you say, Sir, and

I have certainly been very puzzled. I say this last thing to be mischievous' (Atwood 1997a: 98). As Margaret Rogerson argues, '[t]he vision of Grace stitching in the fading light is one of apparent tranquillity, but it may represent what she wants her audience to see rather than a clear recollection of the scene' (1998: 8). Thus this is another form of knowledge she possesses and can use to her advantage. Out of rigid patterned solutions to how a quilt should look—and therefore also how the quilt pattern should be understood—Grace re-creates new patterns and new meanings. At the end of *Alias Grace*, after she has been released from prison, Grace writes to Dr. Jordan about the first quilt she makes for herself, and this time she is truthful about her intentions when making it: 'It is a Tree of Paradise; but I am changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas' (Atwood 1997a: 459). In this pattern she includes herself, the murdered Nancy Montgomery, and Mary Whitney, who was also murdered, in Grace's opinion: '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' (460). The Tree of Paradise thus returns once more, but not because Dr. Jordan gives her an apple. Instead of using the themes of Adam and Eve, she frames the story (quilt) with herself, Nancy and Mary. The quilt now becomes a political comment of sorts; the women and their sexuality have been judged by others. But instead of the origin of sin, which is lacking in the pattern of the quilt, these women now rise above Victorian conventions about their sex and class.

Dr. Jordan: The failed man of science

The ideal scientist of the nineteenth century, according to Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, practiced, among other things, 'self-discipline, self-restraint, self-abnegation, self-restraint, self-annihilation' (2007: 203). Simon Jordan's private life, actions, thoughts, dreams, and fantasies demonstrate he has difficulties in fulfilling this ideal. He is a man who struggles with his emotional responses every time he encounters Grace. His education and sense of professionalism are what guide him, but his emotional background, including constant demands from his mother to find a proper wife, are obstacles to his line of work. His perception of women is another: he likes to picture women he meets as prostitutes (57), for example, and most of his sexual experience has been with prostitutes. King asserts that the two most influential images of women during the

Victorian age were the two 'polarised extremes of "madonnas" and "magdalenes"' (2005: 10). Since Grace's narration enables her to move away from, and between, the Victorian conventions, the result is that Dr. Jordan remains emotionally and professionally torn between what he experiences in their meetings. Her movement between sin and innocence makes him frustrated. He would like to slap her (Atwood 1997a: 362), rape her (388), and he also imagines himself marrying her (388). In his meetings with other women, his inner emotional conflicts contribute to his misogynistic attitude. He develops a sexual relationship with his landlady Rachel, but she becomes merely a substitute for the Grace he cannot touch, except via the handling of the fruit and vegetables. Similarly, Jeanette King claims that the sexual relationship with Rachel exposes 'the sexual dimensions of his supposedly scientific investigation' of Grace (2005: 74). Jordan's first sexual experience was with a servant, and he constantly recalls the event; a recollection that King suggests is idealized in such a way that it is 'an image of a more innocent time,' signalling that 'he is in denial about the exploitation of women by men, and particularly of poor women by rich men' (2005: 76). However, considering the general lack of understanding he has of the power structures and norms of his time, I would argue that he is not in denial; he is ignorant.

With Grace, 'things are a little better, as he can still delude himself by flourishing his own sense of purpose' (Atwood 1997a: 291). The landlady, Rachel, is an openly needy woman who is looking for a way out of an unhappy marriage. When they are intimately close, his disgust for her starts to increase, eventually leading to fantasies about killing her. In comparison, Grace is untouchable to him, and therefore the distance to her is larger. The sexual fantasies, such as when he gives her fruits, or when she is sitting in front of him making a quilt, must remain fantasies: 'She was threading the needle now; she wet the end of the thread in her mouth, to make it easier, and this gesture seemed to him both completely natural and unbearably intimate' (Atwood 1997a: 95).

Although he feels that 'things are a little better' with Grace, Dr. Jordan indeed deludes himself when he thinks that 'they are approaching together the centre of Grace's narrative. […] She may not know that she knows, but buried deep within her, the knowledge is there' (291). Dr. Jordan's idea of his professional success is shown in the pronoun 'they'; it is only with his help that Grace can relive the times she says she has forgotten. However, they are not converging in the centre, because in their sessions together, Grace deliberately de-centres her story: she may well give him one piece here and there, but the centre remains a blur. She also admits to the reader that she embroiders her story on a regular basis: ‘Because he 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’ (247).

Grace’s ambiguity manifests itself in one of Dr. Jordan’s many dreams, which are often sexual in nature. He dreams that he is powerless, surrounded by women who have power. He dreams he is in a corridor and a door is opened; ‘Inside it is the sea’ (139). He finds himself caressed by women: ‘It’s the maids; only they can swim. But now they are swimming away from him, abandoning him. He calls out to them, *Help me*, but they are gone’ (139). The dream is a metaphor for Jordan’s attitude towards women in general: they are either domesticated, perhaps doing traditional female work such as quilting, or they are highly sexual, and therefore threatening. His sense of professionalism is affected in Grace’s case, because she deviates from these norms, instead combining and toying with them. In the dream, the women’s power is described as being a threat to his life, as he cannot swim. As Simone Fullagar asserts, ‘various categorisarions of emotional and mental distress in Western cultures have been historically underpinned by oppositional power relations [such as] sane/insane, normal/abnormal, healthy/ill, [and] masculine/feminine’ (2017: 40). The thoughts and dreams Dr. Jordan has show that the power relations are switched in the meetings with Grace; the oppositional categories are no longer valid. Furthermore, it is a figurative account of how Jordan regards his sessions with Grace. She is tempting, but she is too vague and problematical to pin down. She does not supply him with the answers he expects and needs in order to conclude his work. Just like the swimming maids, she does not help him. In another dream, he sees Grace

> coming towards him across a wide lawn in sunshine, all in white, carrying an armful of red flowers: they are so clear he can see the dewdrops on them. Her hair is loose, her feet bare; she’s smiling. Then he sees that what she walks on is not grass but water; and as he reaches to embrace her, she melts away like mist. (413)

Her hair is loose, as he saw her in their first meeting. Moreover, this illustrates Grace’s state of constant elusiveness, which echoes the many occasions she replies vaguely or with mocking wit when he gives her fruit. He can never embrace her psychologically or physically. The fact that he now mentally connects her with water is an indication of his ultimate defeat by this project. If Grace is water, then she is fluid, which means that he cannot finish with her in the way he wishes, and therefore he can never find the truth.

Concluding remarks

The conclusion of Margaret Atwood's novel is brutal in many respects. Dr. Jordan leaves Canada, ashamed and confused, and serves in the American Civil War. There he is wounded in the head and because of it suffers from partial amnesia. He is thus very cruelly but definitely freed from his haunting memories of Grace and his failure as a scientific man. Grace Marks, on the other hand, is released from prison and enters into a marriage with a man who once testified against her. Even though she becomes a free person, it is not real freedom due to this marriage. In her thoughts, she tells Dr. Jordan that Jamie Walsh, her husband, enjoys hearing about her troubled life: 'Now that I think of it, you were as eager as Mr. Walsh is to hear about my sufferings and my hardships in life; and not only that, but you would write them down as well' (457). It is evident that Grace Marks will continue to use her knowledge after prison life. She says: 'I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued. […] It calls for a different arrangement of the face; but I suppose it will become easier in time' (443). With her knowledge gained from observations, eavesdropping, meetings with the chaplain, and her deep friendship with Mary Whitney among other things, her many conversations with Dr. Jordan have given her the opportunity to use the knowledge to her advantage, which, in turn, also gives her the tools to manage outside prison. She can be in control of the truth production concerning her own person. Dr. Jordan's fate however seems to be cemented in ignorance, and his head injuries are ironic evidence of that.

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