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## **She's Such a Tease:**

**The Feminine as Burlesque Performance in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman***

**Katherine Ovens**

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Women, complains Len Slank in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, are "always after you to marry them. You've got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and then get out" (62). Len is an old friend of the novel's main character, Marian MacAlpine, and his romantic creed encapsulates what critics have noted is the dominant image in Atwood's novel: that of the hunt

(Greene; Hobgood; Melley). While there are female hunters in this novel—Marian's roommate Ainsley entraps Len as part of her plan to become pregnant, and Lucy,

one of Marian's co-workers, trawls fancier restaurants at lunchtime, hoping to hook a businessman and transform him into a husband—the images of chase, capture, and consumption become markedly sexualized when the female is positioned as prey. Indeed, the metaphor of the striptease subsumes the novel's imagery of violent physical consumption of captured prey under a more subtle metaphor of visual consumption of a female body—a body controlled by and behaving for the satisfaction of a male subject's appetite. In this novel, Atwood explores the possibilities for the rejection of societally-imposed norms of femininity by positioning Marian variously as prey, as striptease artist, and finally, as burlesque performer. Marian's relationship with Peter, her eventual fiancé, develops through tactics of teasing and pleasing; while Atwood casts the female subject as lead actor in this performance, her role is shaped by the coaching and instructions of her male director, Peter, and criticized by Duncan, a graduate student of English with whom Marian has an affair. Marian's femininity becomes increasingly and obviously erotic and artificial as she attempts to satisfy both

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director and critic, until her performance transforms from striptease to burlesque parody. Ultimately, however, while Marian does escape Peter's clutches by offering him a cake baked in the image of her burlesque self, she does not reject her role as performer.

Atwood has been notoriously resistant to any attempts to label her work as feminist. She has insisted that *The Edible Woman*, her first novel and written in 1965, predates any coherent feminist movement (Tolan 2). Nevertheless, as a text primarily concerned with the formulation of the feminine identity in a patriarchal society, *The Edible Woman* can certainly be interrogated as a feminist text. Indeed, in the introduction to its 1988 edition, Atwood admits to having "read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors" like many others during the 1960s (qtd. in Tolan 9). Beauvoir's influence is particularly notable here. As Fiona Tolan points out, when Beauvoir famously asserted that "'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,' she initiated the sex and gender distinction that later became crucial to the anti-essentialist arguments of second-wave feminism" (14). Gender, of course, is a role that is assumed: it is not "a biological fact ... [but] a social and a linguistic construction" (Jehlen 264). Although Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* would not appear for another twenty-five years after the publication of *The Edible Woman*, the novel draws from Beauvoir to anticipate Butler's concept of performative identity. Femininity, like masculinity, is a performance, the terms of which are dictated by a complex social and cultural framework; Atwood highlights this understanding of gender in her first novel by demonstrating the calculated nature of Marian's gendered identity.

There are many male gazes in Atwood's novel, but for Marian, Peter's gaze is the definitive one. Indeed, as a character, Peter functions as the personification of broader,

contemporary societal expectations concerning gender, or what Butler identifies as “the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (173). Atwood explores the possibilities for women to evade these societal expectations by positing Marian, her main character, as object to Peter’s subject. As Ellen Peel explains, “A woman may consider herself a subject but face strong pressure from a society that urges her to see herself as object, as other. Simone de Beauvoir says that woman ‘is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is Absolute—she is the Other’” (Peel 118-19). Marian’s status as Peter’s Other, or object, is illustrated variously through the tropes of the striptease and the hunt. Both metaphors posit the female body as a containable, consumable object, existing solely to satisfy the pleasure of the male subject, be he hunter or audience member. In this way the novel can be read as allegory, with Peter as the absolute of society. However, Marian’s simultaneous acquiescence and growing discomfort with her function in their relationship takes on broader implications for the feminine in what Atwood asserts is a proto-feminist, mid-1960s setting.

Peter begins dating Marian because of her “aura of independence and common sense” (Atwood 57). “He saw me,” Marian notes, “as the kind of girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life” (57). Peter does not want a girlfriend who will require him to take care of her; in fact, he “had recently had an unpleasant experience with what he called ‘the other kind’” (57). This “other kind” of girl is one who cannot anticipate and follow Peter’s direction as Marian can. For example, when Peter is devastated by the marriage of his last single friend, Trigger, Marian listens to his lament wordlessly: “There was nothing I could say. If I agreed with him it would intensify his depression, and if I disagreed he would suspect me of siding with the bride.... So this time I said nothing”

(60). Marian has learned quickly from previous instances of Peter's self-pity, and can now regulate her behaviour according to Peter's expectations. Patricia Goldblatt notes that for most of Atwood's novel, Marian strives never to "deviate from *the proper behaviour*" (276, italics in the original). Peter affirms his satisfaction with her performance when he praises her for understanding: "Most women wouldn't, but you're so sensible" (Atwood 61). Again, Peter emphasizes Marian's behaviour, modelled to satisfy his previous instructions, as being based on common sense; however, it is Peter who gets to define "common sense" in the first place. Additionally, Peter's use of the term "common sense" as applied to Marian suggests its feminine opposite: hysteria. As Tolan points out, hysteria is "traditionally considered a female malady, the term deriving from the Latin, *hystericus*, literally, 'of the womb'" (22). Being associated with the uncontrollable urges of the female body, the term at once trivializes a woman's emotional needs, and relegates her significance to the purely physical.

Peter perceives Marian to be in control of her body and her emotions, and therefore able to keep both in check. Their relationship has so far been casual, with Marian accommodating Peter's demands in a detached and placating manner. Marian is in agreement with the terms that Peter sets for their relationship: "We had been taking each other at our face values, which meant we had got on very well. Of course I had to adjust to his moods, but that's true of any man, and his were too obvious to cause much difficulty" (Atwood 57). Marian's allowance that *she* had to adjust to *his* moods reveals the calculated nature of her behaviour around Peter, as well as who is directing this performance. Marian takes her cues from Peter, adapting herself to suit his needs and revealing of her self only what she knows he would like to see. There is an element of tease here, of the desirable framed flatteringly: Marian clothes her personality

suggestively, camouflaging her bulges and revealing her best features. She is an object, consumable, and Peter is both director and paying customer. Marian's assertion that this performance would be necessary for any man situates this capitalistic transaction beyond this particular, fictional relationship. Atwood reveals that in contemporary relationships between gender-normative men and women, it is femininity that is choreographed, and choreographed according to the desires of the male.

By contrast, Peter, not Marian, is in control of his own carefully cultivated behaviour. While describing the suit Peter has chosen to wear to dinner, Marian reflects that Peter knows "how to blend in and stand out at the same time" (148). Atwood is careful to reference Peter's skill at dressing himself at different points in the novel; indeed, even when he is "carelessly dressed," it is "an arranged carelessness; he was meticulously unshaven, and his socks matched the colour of the paint-stains on his sports-shirt" (86). Never do Marian's desires figure into the fashion decisions made by Peter, and it is clear that he is dressing for himself and the world in general, not for her: "Really, she thought, anyone seeing him would find him exceptionally handsome" (148). Marian is consciously aware of her fiancé's attractiveness to everyone else in the restaurant, highlighting that Peter's performance is not primarily intended to cater to her taste. While Ainsley describes Peter as being "nicely packaged" (148), cynically relegating Peter to the status of consumable object, this packaging is chosen by Peter without consultation with what Marian might desire or expect. Peter's control over his dress is enhanced by his control over their dinner: he chooses the wine and the filet mignon for both of them, and proceeds to explain to Marian how they will discipline and educate their future children.

As their relationship progresses from casual to committed, Peter becomes increasingly predatory. In his essay "'Stalked by Love': Female Paranoia and the Stalker Novel," Timothy Melley points to a scene near the beginning of Atwood's novel in which "Peter describes gutting a rabbit in the idiom of sexual violence." While the couple are having drinks with Len and Ainsley in the lounge of the Park Plaza, Len and Peter discuss hunting: "I picked it up and Trigger said, 'You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts'll fall out.' So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack" (Atwood 65). The violent, sexual imagery of the knife along with the use of the feminine pronoun in this anecdote associates Peter with an aggressive masculinity. Marian notes that "the quality of Peter's voice had changed; it was a voice I didn't recognize" (65). After a summer of casual dating and orchestrated personalities, Peter here is no longer hiding his unattractive traits from Marian: by positioning the rabbit as female, Peter reveals a more disturbing understanding of gender that views the female as submissive. In his hunting anecdote, Peter is agent, able to take, manipulate and destroy; the rabbit, positioned as female, is helpless, and is destroyed. The rabbit is object to Peter's subject, existing only in relation to him.

Marian's assertion that the tone of Peter's voice had changed is underscored by Melley's association of Peter's speech with sexual violence: it is not only the subject matter of the conversation that positions Peter as predatory, but the timbre of the voice itself. As Marian silently wills Peter to turn to her and talk "in his normal voice," she reflects that his words first seem to be "coming from a distance," then getting "louder and faster" (65-6). Subsequently, he pauses to laugh at the gruesome conclusion to his hunting story as "Len bare[s] his teeth" in response—an animalistic, aggressive gesture (65).

These tonal cues suggest the building tension and crescendo of the hunt, as well as the deep, altered, faceless voice at the other end of the stereotypical obscene phone call. Indeed, as Marian notes the foreign quality of Peter's voice, she is unable to see his face as he leans forward toward Len and away from her—a posture that detaches his voice from his body, rendering it anonymous and threatening (66).

Subsequently, Marian begins to lose control of her body. She discovers that she is crying, and when they leave the hotel, she runs from the group. This flight re-enacts the story of the rabbit hunt, with Peter "enclosing himself in the armour of the car" to chase after her (69). Once again, the female is prey, helpless against the powerful male and his tools (this time a car instead of a gun or a knife). Peter ultimately catches up with Marian: he "must have stalked me and waited there on the side-street, knowing I would come over the wall" (70). With the echo of the rabbit story still reverberating through the text, this "stalking" is threateningly sexual, and is made even more disturbing by the knowledge that the hunter is Marian's fiancé. However, Marian immediately laughs with relief in being "stopped and held," suggesting that, for her, the fulfillment of the sexual dynamic established with the rabbit story is reassuring (70). Her relief demonstrates that although her flight from the group may have been an act of survival, an intuitive attempt to escape the fate of the rabbit, her successful capture restores her to the familiar role of consumable object. In fact, her elation at being caught, as well as Peter's later fond remembrance of the event, suggests that the two have positioned this chase as sport, or as yet another successful performance: Marian tantalizingly eluded capture for just enough time to give Peter the thrill of the chase, then surrendered herself to him. Marian's reaction shifts the pursuit from violence to make-believe, and evokes the sexualized, role-playing dynamics of the heteronormative striptease. Peter's "forgiving, understanding, [and] a little



patronizing" tone indicates that, overall, he is pleased with Marian's ability to entice him so thoroughly and accommodate her performance to his control (79).

Atwood further positions Marian as a sexual actor to be directed, then consumed, by Peter during various sex scenes. Two of these occasions are remembered in retrospect, as a third winds down: as Marian lies in the bathtub in Peter's apartment, Peter prone on top of her, she recalls having sex with him on the sheepskin rug on his bedroom floor, and another time on a blanket in a field. All three of these carefully orchestrated copulations have occurred in incongruous locations, and Marian considers what criteria might have led Peter to select each. What is critical, however, is not why they take place where they do, but why they happen at all. Each time one of Peter's bachelor friends has gotten married, Peter has negotiated intercourse in a setting that is undomesticated and unfamiliar. Marian muses that it was "perhaps an attempt to assert youthfulness and spontaneity, a revolt against the stale doom of stockings in the sink and bacon fat congealed in pans evoked for him by his friends' marriages" (56). Sex is mundane and predictable in the domesticated scenes that Marian imagines. Bedding Marian in a variety of unusual locations keeps the encounter new, and maintains the sexualized consumer-performer relationship. Marian remains the object of his desire and the provider of a service, not an equal partner in a union. In the bathtub, Peter lifts his head and sleepily asks Marian, "'How was it for you?' ... 'Marvellous,' I murmured; why couldn't he tell? One of these days I should say 'Rotten,' just to see what he would do" (58). As a provider of a service—that of teasing and pleasing—Marian's enjoyment of the sexual encounter is only relevant in so far as it allows Peter to reassure himself of his own sexual abilities.

Marian's name points intriguingly to its Biblical root, evoking two figures: Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' devoted followers. Both of these women symbolically embody both chastity and sensuality: the Virgin Mary as a woman who remained unviolated by man, yet bore a son of her own flesh, and Mary Magdalene as a former prostitute who embraced Jesus's teachings and renounced her former life. Both women represent the virgin/whore dichotomy that so pervades Western culture, and Marian MacAlpine is not an exception in this Marian symbolism. She remembers that her first date with Peter "had almost been the last. He had plied me with hi-fi music and brandy, thinking he was crafty and suave, and I had allowed myself to be manipulated into the bedroom" (57). Marian performs a sexualized dance of resistance and capitulation, maintaining a tempting façade of reluctant curiosity that allows Peter to believe that he is in control of the scene. However, the reality is not that Marian is directing the action, as her account initially suggests. Her performance is designed to be artificial. In fact, it is Peter who is allowing Marion to allow Peter to control events. This double illusion is shattered when Peter accidentally knocks a brandy snifter off the desk. The show has been interrupted, and Peter's mood shifts to irritation in response.

The sex scene that corresponds with this initial encounter in Peter's bedroom is the novel's final sex scene between Peter and Marian, which takes place close to the date of their upcoming marriage. The dynamics of this final scene reveal the extent to which Marian has become the object of Peter's sexual appetites: "Later, Marian was resting on her stomach with an ashtray balanced in the hollow of her back; this time her eyes were open. She was watching Peter eat. 'I really worked up an appetite,' he had said, grinning at her" (216). Marian lies on the bed in a pose reminiscent of an erotic photo shoot, with an ashtray placed on her back, as though

pinning her down. Peter remains free to smoke and consume—the piece of cake, a cigarette, or Marian. Marian cannot move, cannot eat, and cannot act until Peter moves the ashtray. Peter does move it, but only so that Marian can fetch him a drink, “and while you’re up, flip over the record, that’s a good girl” (215). Here Marian is at once a piece of furniture, conveniently placed to support Peter’s accoutrements, and an alluring female form, waiting for Peter to decide her next action. She is literally pinned to the bed, as a pin-up girl would be to a wall. In both roles she remains captured object to his subject: performing as he dictates, teasing according to his criteria, and catering to his desires as necessary.

Melley points to the various hints of male violence in *The Edible Woman* to identify how Atwood is able to “articulate ... the social control of women while still accounting for female agency and self-control” (3). He suggests that Atwood uses Peter to demonstrate the pressures of society’s “normative heterosexuality and female normalization” (3), echoing Butler’s identification of the “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” as the structure that delineates the boundaries of our sexual identities (173). Indeed, as Marian lies in the bed with the ashtray on her back, she asks Peter, “‘Am I normal?’ He laughed and patted her on the rump. ‘I’d say from my limited experience that you’re marvellously normal, darling’” (Atwood 215). Although Peter misunderstands and assumes she means biologically (sexually) normal, this remark is telling: Marian relies on Peter for an evaluation of her performance as a woman, and his verdict is based on her performance in bed—an evaluation of Marian that reduces her to a sexualized female body. Peter’s response articulates the social expectations of woman as a body sexualized for the benefit of the male gaze in modern, material society.

Peter, Len, and Fish are men cut from the same patriarchal cloth. Even Marian's friend Clara's mild-mannered and devoted husband Joe laments to Marian that women should not go to university because "she gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married her core gets invaded ... her image of herself, if you like" (246). This image that Joe insists is invaded by marriage is a woman's image of self as subject: an image that Beauvoir asserts cannot exist in relation to the male. Joe, Peter, and Len all subscribe to the dichotomy of woman as the passive counterpart to man. Each maintains criteria for the acceptable expression of femininity, and these criteria are concerned with standards of performance that tease and deny, tempt and withhold, and place primacy on the female body as the expression of that femininity. Atwood introduces another male character, however, that disrupts this unquestioning endorsement of socially prescribed expectations of femininity.

Duncan is a graduate student in English Literature whom Marian encounters as she is conducting a door-to-door survey for her employer, a marketing agency. He has been working on the same term paper for two years, and seems to be slowly going insane. "Words," he explains, "are beginning to lose their meanings" (94). Marian suggests that he might like to try a career in another industry. He retorts:

"What else *can* I do? Once you've gone this far you aren't fit for anything else. Something happens to your mind. You're overqualified, overspecialized, and everybody knows it. Nobody in any other game would be crazy enough to hire me. I wouldn't even make a good ditch-digger, I'd start tearing apart the sewer system, trying to pick-axe and unearth all those chthonic symbols—pipes, valves, cloacal conduits.... No, no. I'll have to be a slave in the paper-mines for all time." (95-6)

If language is the tool through which we shape our reality, Duncan has been manipulating words for so long that his reality is beginning to disintegrate. Specifically, he is unable to turn off his critical tendencies, which leads him to attempt dissection of any system he encounters, be it linguistic, cultural, cloacal—or gender.

Gayle Greene, discussing *The Edible Woman* as a “mad housewife” novel in her *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, identifies Duncan as Peter’s antithesis (77). Indeed, while Peter enthusiastically articulates, and therefore perpetuates, an ideal femininity, Duncan refuses to engage with Marian’s crisis of identity at all: “He didn’t seem to care about what would happen to her after she passed out of the range of his perpetual present: the only comment he had ever made about the time after her marriage implied that he supposed he would have to dig up another substitute” (Atwood 190). Duncan, as a student of language, sees all too clearly the social collusion that constructs a symbolic femininity. Structuralist thought emphasizes the relative constructedness of sign systems; thus, for Duncan, Marian’s femininity is inevitably artificial. If “in language there are only differences without positive terms,” as de Saussure postulated in his *Course in General Linguistics* (120), the feminine can only ever be a substitute, useful only for its function in defining the masculine. Marian’s feminine self is only significant to Duncan insofar as it reveals and shapes his own masculine identity.

Duncan’s cynicism and disinterest in Marian contrasts with Peter’s interest in her specifically for her performance of a sexualized femininity. Duncan does, however, desire to believe in the fiction of gendered performance that seems so artificial to him: “When I’m supposed to be writing term-papers I think about sex, but when I’ve got some willing lovely backed into a corner or we’re thrashing about under

hedged and so on and everybody is supposed to be all set-up for the *coup de grace*, I start thinking about term papers” (Atwood 196). Specifically, he thinks of the infinite incarnations of sexual tension that have been constructed in literature, and can’t help comparing his partners’ performances with the heteronormative script contained in each of these. For Duncan, the performance is always defined by what it is not. When he is with women, he “can’t concentrate on the surface. As long as you only think about the surface I suppose it’s all right, and real enough; but once you start thinking about what’s inside...” (194; ellipsis in original). By distinguishing between surface and core, Duncan grasps the constructedness of the feminine identity, and therefore can find only absence beneath the artificiality of the performance. Nevertheless, Duncan asks Marian if she will sleep with him to see if she is any different. Duncan’s request differs from Peter’s expectations only in that Duncan asks bluntly: both understand Marian as an erotic actor to be hired, directed, and consumed. Peter believes in Marian’s performance; Duncan wants to believe in it, and hopes (but doubts) that Marian can provide a convincing show. Marian asks Duncan why being in bed with her would be any different than being in bed with any other girl, and Duncan replies, “It probably wouldn’t be. But now that I’ve told you at least you wouldn’t get hysterical” (197), thereby echoing Peter’s approval of Marian’s sensible and common sense nature.

The artificial, sexualized woman that Marian has allowed herself to become is finally fully manifested the night of Peter’s party, just before their wedding. Peter

had suggested she might have something done with her hair. He had also hinted that perhaps she should buy a dress that was, as he put it, ‘not quite so mousy’ as any she already owned, and she had duly bought one. It was short, red and sequined. She didn’t think it was really

her, but the saleslady did. 'It's you, dear,' she had said, her voice positive. (216)

When Ainsley sees Marian's sculpted updo and provocative dress, she lends her a pair of heavy earrings and offers to apply her makeup. The result is an unrecognizable reflection in the mirror that Marian feels is frosted, artificial, erasing, and not her at all. Yet, it is a tantalizing image, designed to arouse and entertain the male libido. It is the image of the sexualized female body, whose only purpose is to satisfy a male audience. Peter is pleased: "The implication had been that it would be most pleasant if she could arrange to look like that all the time" (238). He even murmurs, "yum yum" into the back of her neck, equating her frosted exterior with a delicious confection to be devoured (237).

Marian has responded to Peter's cues, constructing her gender identity to satisfy the specifications of normative femininity. However, it is this satisfaction that ultimately reveals the artificiality of Marian's performance and repositions her feminine body into a bawdy version of the feminine. Victoria Boynton, in her discussion of the destabilization of the female body in Atwood's early work, illustrates that Atwood frequently locates her female characters "outside of the heterosexual binary where women are defined by sight/cite: where to be is to be seen, and to be seen is to be pursued as a desirable object" (54). Boynton quotes Butler's *Bodies That Matter* to suggest that these characters trouble the heterosexual binary by "undermin[ing] their own seeming naturalness and stability":

As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the

norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. (qtd. in Boynton 53-4)

According to Butler, an accurate performance of the feminine reveals itself as performance even as it works to naturalize itself. In *The Edible Woman*, as Marian's performance of femininity has become increasingly faithful to the heterosexual script provided by Peter, the "gaps and fissures"—the excesses inherent in any normative performance of femininity—correspondingly begin to destabilize this performance. Marian's discomfort with "this red dress and this face" (Atwood 232) position her appearance as a costume, and her inability to control her facial expressions and other movements points to the uncontained excesses that Butler identifies in any performance of femininity.

In her article "Grrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-Burlesque and the Performance of Gender," Claire Nally contrasts burlesque with striptease, emphasizing that burlesque is a "politically aware and self-conscious programme of entertainment, as opposed to a simplistic display of the flesh" (622). Lynn Sally adds to this definition of the dramatic genre of burlesque, identifying it as a titillating stage performance with its roots in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: "The fear of this image of the brazen woman parodying not only highbrow and popular culture but gender itself—all the time 'aware of her own awarishness'—was one of the driving forces behind critiques surrounding burlesque" (6). The classic burlesque stage show parodies gender, among other topics, by over performing and emphasizing the excesses that Butler identifies as fundamental to all gendered identities. Gérard Genette's definition of burlesque as a narrative technique is also helpful for examining Marian's transformation from essentialized female to bawdy performer. Genette defines burlesque travesty as a rewrite of "a noble text by preserving its 'action,' meaning its fundamental



content and movement ... but impressing on it an entirely different elocution, or 'style'" (58). Although Genette differentiates between burlesque and parody, his focus on burlesque's alteration of the style of the satirized text suggests that it is the delivery, or performance, that is the object of burlesque criticism, not the content. Similarly, Sally insists that "beauty in the world of burlesque is performative, and that 'painting on' one's image is a form of drag that in the world of burlesque has destabilized the concept of beauty and even gender itself" (12). The burlesque performer challenges femininity as an essential, natural identity not by redefining its content, but by calling the audience's attention to the excesses and uncontainable aspects to be found in any performance of gender. Duncan's accusatory reaction to Marian's appearance confirms its burlesque nature: "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade.... Who the hell are you supposed to be?" (Atwood 250). Marian is in effect supposed to be the desirable feminine image, but in a way that defamiliarizes the delivery. In the sense of Genette's definition of the burlesque, Duncan recognizes the content, but not the text: Marian's surface is destabilized, and no longer points to a heteronormative femininity, however artificial it may have been.

As it has evolved, burlesque as a stage genre has become divorced from its roots as political and social commentary, and is often associated with stylized but apolitical erotic entertainment (Nally 622). Indeed, Robert C. Allen points out that although "the refiguring of woman that occurred on the burlesque stage represents the establishment of a model that will prove to be extremely powerful ... burlesque also presents a model for the sexual objectification of women in popular entertainment" (27). While burlesque offers an opportunity to critique societal understandings of gender in a way that is empowering for the feminine, it also has the potential to mirror what Boynton describes as a heterosexual binary.

Boynton's formulation "where to be is to be seen, and to be seen is to be pursued as a desirable object" (54) posits the female as the object of the male gaze: an object meant for admiration, chase, and ultimately consumption. Initially, this formulation would seem to apply to the burlesque performer as well. Indeed, in her article interrogating the dynamics of the female striptease, Dahlia Schweitzer concludes, "When all you notice is the 'object' body, without any understanding of the 'lived' body creating it, then the striptease becomes little more than an economic transaction, where dollars equal sexual exposure. Men pay to see the image of the stripper as commodity" (74). Schweitzer, like Boynton, assumes a male audience, and assigns this audience control over the reception of the female body. Nally, however, refuses this performer/audience, female/male, object/subject schema by pointing to the "self-awareness" of the burlesque performer—an awareness built into the performance that acknowledges the gaze of the audience through "winks and come-hither glances" (639). Nally insists that for burlesque, "such a return or answer to the gaze also contravened the idea of ownership (and thus the commodification of the female body), as the woman on display, the woman who invites glances and returns them, is ultimately escaping patriarchal governance" (639). This gazing back acknowledges the male gaze and reinforces the burlesque performance as a satirical comment on the normativity of gender. By insisting on her subjectivity through her ability to gaze back, the burlesque artist, unlike the striptease performer, can refuse the heteronormative binary that the male gaze assumes, and control her performance of femininity even as she satirizes it.

Notably, as a student of English literature, Duncan is the only character in Atwood's novel who is able to recognize that Marian's body in its burlesque costume is destabilizing the normativity of femininity. Atwood describes Marian's

appearance as excessive and artificial, but Peter is only one of several characters who in fact endorse Marian's appearance. For example, Duncan's roommate Trevor exclaims, "I didn't recognize you, my dear you look elegant, you should really wear red more often" (249). Trevor's comment suggests that Marian's costume is somehow truer to her essential self than her everyday appearance. These male gazes do not recognize the gaps and fissures that are opened up by Marian's overly precise performance. Indeed, despite her discomfort, Marian herself is not able to access the destabilizing potential of her made-up (bawdy) body. She accompanies Duncan to a seedy hotel in her party attire, and becomes acutely aware of her appearance as promiscuous: "The night clerk looked over at Marian with an undistinguished though slightly jaded leer. She drooped her eyelids at him. After all, she thought grimly, if I'm dressed like one and acting like one, why on earth shouldn't he think I really am one?" (263). There is no "self-awarishness" in Marian's performance: she recognizes herself not as a burlesque performer, but as a prostitute, meant only for immediate and total consumption. It is a role that she has played with Peter, and she is familiar with it. Here, she steps into the role consciously and acknowledges the male gaze not by gazing back in the style of burlesque, but by lowering her eyes demurely and provocatively—a gesture that allows and invites the night clerk to consume her visually, an object to his subject.

The night following Peter's party, Marian, who has now recognized her femininity as commodity, if not as performance, bakes and ices a cake in the image of her burlesque appearance. She accuses Peter of having been trying to destroy her, to consume her subjectivity as he would consume this symbolic, glazed confection: "This is what you wanted all along, isn't it?" she asks, offering him a piece (284). He flees in horror. Marian reflects that "as a symbol

[the cake] had definitely failed," then begins to eat almost the entire cake by herself (285). Duncan is equally eager to eat the cake when he arrives a few days later, and finishes off the head and hair. Peel also identifies Duncan as being able to examine reality where others cannot: "He has been a reader and interpreter all along. In the final scene, he interprets the book's events as radically undecidable in a speech that concerns the ambiguity of who is subject and who is object. The speech concludes with the possibility that people can be both" (113). People can certainly be both, but cakes cannot. Despite his tendency to overanalyze until even words lose their meaning, he is not at all interested in the cake as a symbolic woman. For Marian and Duncan, the cake is finally just a cake: an object to be consumed, to satisfy their appetites, and nothing more. When Ainsley, aghast at seeing Marian devouring a woman shaped cake, exclaims, "Marian! ... You're rejecting your femininity!" Marian replies, "Nonsense.... It's only a cake" (Atwood 286). Marian is not destroying the image of the sexualized feminine identity, as defined by Butler's obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality, which the cake represents. Instead, she recognizes it as the product that it is, and consumes it according to its function.

Atwood has "described *The Edible Woman* as a circle in which the heroine ends where she began" (Kelly 331). Critics are divided over whether any real progress is made at all in the novel, since Marian is again single, thinking of returning to her dead-end job, and on the hunt for a new roommate. As Darlene Kelly points out, *The Edible Woman* was "written at a time when what was wrong with the old order had been spelled out but the alternatives had not" (331). In baking the cake woman and offering it to Peter, Marian does not seek to liberate herself from the subordinate femininity that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* had identified. Rather, the burlesque, self-aware, critically performed femininity that

Atwood places on Marian is removed and returned to its status as object. The novel points forward to Butler's assertion that gender is performative, but stops short of suggesting "the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 180). However, by baking the cake in her own image, recognizing it as object, and consuming it, Atwood (via Marian) does destabilize the heterosexual gender binary by suggesting that the performance of the female body need not be seen only through the gaze of a male audience. Marian may not have evolved from striptease performer to burlesque artist, but she equally no longer imagines herself as Peter's prey. She effectively fires Peter; the suggestion is that Marian can construct her own feminine identity as "both self and other, both subject and object" (Peel 120). Atwood's proto-feminist first novel, therefore, may not have provided a solution to the then-nascent frustration with socially constructed definitions of femininity, but it does clearly demarcate both the audience and the stage, and suggests that such seemingly disparate social space may in fact be traversable, whether performing, or admiring the performance. ©

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## She's Such a Tease

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