

INEDIBLE WOMEN: CARROLLIAN IDENTITY CRISIS IN *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) has been found to have some similarities with Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. However, critics have failed to elucidate the most important parallels of the works, which link the infantilizing of Alice by the denizens of Wonderland to a similar restriction of autonomy and objectification of Marian, Atwood's protagonist. Through an intertextual reading of *The Edible Woman*, one can better diagnose Marian's strange condition and understand Atwood's overarching criticism of modern patriarchy.

Of course everybody knows *Alice* is a sexual-identity-crisis book ... this is the little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit-burrow, becoming as it were pre-natal, trying to find her role... her role as a Woman. ... One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them ... She rejects Maternity when the baby she's nursing turns into a pig, nor does she respond positively to the dominating-female role of the Queen and her castration cries of 'Off with his head!' then there are those most suggestive scenes ... where her neck becomes elongated and she is accused of being a serpent, hostile to eggs ... a rather destructively-phallic identity she indignantly rejects ... So anyway she makes a lot of attempts but she refuses to commit herself, you can't say that by the end of the book she has reached anything that can be definitely called maturity (*EW* 212)

Critics continue to argue the pertinence of the parallels between Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass* (1872). The most conspicuous link between the texts occurs when at a dinner party Fisher Smythe, a zany graduate student, makes the critique of Carroll's work quoted above; more subtle intertextual connections follow. Marian, the novel's protagonist, represents a modern-day, self-made Canadian Alice; her young friend, Duncan, a morose and mysterious Mock Turtle, and the dinner party at Duncan's house, a nonsensical Mad Tea Party of sorts. The point of contention among critics rests upon the importance of these parallels (and many others throughout the work) and our understanding of Marian McAlpin's eating problem. John Lauber rejects Fisher Smythe's monologue as irrelevant to *The Edible Woman*, finding the connection to Carroll's work arbitrary. On the other hand, Jennifer Hobgood, Glenys Stow, and David Harkness haphazardly use the parallels between Carroll's works and Atwood's novel to attempt to illuminate Marian's condition.

These three critics, in examining the purpose of the aforementioned parallels, focus their energies on broader topics. For instance, Hobgood explores the novel's theme of consumerism and its associated side effects. Stow approaches the connections to Carroll's works in terms of the nature of nonsense in Atwood's novel. Stow, too, ignores the plight of Atwood's common woman, Marian McAlpin, and instead chooses to analyze the broader criticisms of modern patriarchy. Harkness's intertextual analysis remains the only article that faces Marian's problem head-on, though perhaps not with the care the novel requires. I will utilize the preliminary

groundwork that connects *The Edible Woman* to Carroll's *Alice* stories and, coupling these parallels with important new ones, I plan to diagnose Marian's situation more specifically. The real issue in *The Edible Woman* is an identity crisis much like Alice's, one in which the other characters of Marian's Canadian Wonderland offer up hegemonic female roles that Marian systematically rejects in favor of a self-created identity.

Alice and Marian share a host of similarities. Alice is a "curious child...very fond of pretending to be two people." But, in *Wonderland*, she initially thinks, "It's no use now...to pretend to be two people! Why, there's hardly enough of me left to make *one* respectable person!" (Carroll 24). This thought epitomizes Marian McAlpin's condition; she is slowly being consumed and fragmented by the people around her. "[Alice] continually wonders about her own reality and about the meaning of the strange people and confused rituals she encounters...Marian, like Alice, must find her own way through the chaos of absurd expectations and behavior patterns into which she has plunged" (Stow 91). In her journey, Alice, like Marian, takes "a great interest in questions of eating and drinking" (Carroll 100). Atwood even names her protagonist after Alice: when the White Rabbit encounters Alice, he mistakenly calls her "Mary Ann," confusing her with his maid.

An existential dilemma afflicts Alice and Marian, forcing each to question her identity. Alice, bored on a quiet afternoon, sees the White Rabbit with pink eyes and, curious, follows it down the rabbit hole into a labyrinth of absurdity. Likewise, Marian envisions a white rabbit in her fiancé Peter's hunting story, and her world immediately blurs and changes: "Peter's voice seemed to be getting louder and faster—the stream of words was impossible to follow, and my mind withdrew, concentrating instead on the picture of the scene in the forest... I couldn't see the rabbit...Something inside me started to dash about in dishing mazes of panic" (EW 71). At this point, Marian begins her own White Rabbit chase. When she escapes to the bathroom to avoid making a scene, she sees the roll of toilet paper "crouched" in the stall with her, "helpless and white and furry" (EW 72). Marian's next move echoes the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland* as she runs away from the party; in her peripheral vision she notices her roommate Ainsley "bouncing off...in a flounce of pink and white around the corner" (EW 75). Peter catches her when she falls off a wall, but like Humpty Dumpty, at this point she is too existentially fragmented, and no one can put her together again (EW 76). When she reaches her friend Len's apartment, she mysteriously dives behind the bed among the dust bunnies, where she feels "in a sort of vacuum," below ground (EW 79-80). Her thoughts upon leaving her newfound burrow suggest a reality change: "I had broken out; from what, or into what, I didn't know" (EW 81).

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (Carroll 18) These words, the first spoken by the White Rabbit in chapter one of *Alice in Wonderland*, recall Marian's sentiments, regarding her roommate, in the corresponding chapter of *The Edible Woman*: "I got so caught up in being efficient for Ainsley's benefit while complimenting myself on my moral superiority to her that I didn't realize how late it was until she reminded me" (EW 4). However, while Alice's Wonderland surprises her with absurdities at every turn, Marian's predominantly existential Wonderland more or less follows the conventions of the modern world, cross-referencing Alice's Wonderland only in symbolic allusions.

These appear subtly and often in Marian's Wonderland. The allure Alice finds in both the enchanted garden and the mysterious White Rabbit attracts Marian in similar ways. For instance, in the vegetable area of the supermarket, called "The Market Garden," she "felt like a rabbit, crunching all the time on mounds of leafy greenery" (EW 189). After Alice emerges from a pool of her own tears, she watches as a Dodo holds a caucus-race, a game in which the animals run around until the Dodo tells them to stop. In the end, they all stop running, and they all win the race. Peter, Marian's fiancé, and his bachelor friends see themselves, too, as an endangered species, running around in aimless abandon until the foreboding finish line of marriage halts them. To be sure, Marian likens them to "the last of the dodos, too dumb to get away" (EW 65). Marian also "notes that they, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, had 'clutched each other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of himself that he needed."

Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty” (Harkness 106). The word *mirror* clearly refers to the *Looking Glass* world in which Alice meets the Tweedles.

In the garden, Alice watches three soldiers hurriedly paint the white roses of a rosebush red for the Queen of Hearts. Meanwhile, when Marian brings her hospitalized and matriarchal friend Clara roses, she is “uncertain whether to get the deep red ones, salmon pink, or white,” and like the soldiers afraid of their Queen’s wrath, Marian, too, “was a little sorry now that she had chosen the white” (EW 138). Clara, like the people in Wonderland who so often ignore Alice, doesn’t seem to notice. She remains self-absorbed and unaffected by Marian’s presence. These faint, intertextual reminders in Marian’s existential narrative allude to the fantastic elements of Alice’s own identity crisis.

The day after her ‘rabbit-chase,’ Marian *becomes* Alice, in a sense. Alice, on the hot afternoon on which she dives into the Rabbit-Hole, feels as though “the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid” (Carroll 17). When Marian wakes up “on Sunday morning – it was closer to Sunday afternoon – [her] mind was at first as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of [her] skull and left [her] only the rind to think with.” She looks around, “scarcely recognizing it as a place [she] had ever been before,” and perceives her roommate as “a mermaid perched on a rock” surrounded by “a limp starfish of a banana peel, some bits of shell, and brown crusts of toast beached here and there, random as driftwood” (EW 86-7). Remarkably, this is the first time Marian is hungry but doesn’t eat.

A helplessness now seizes both Alice and Marian. Alice, confused and alone, begins to feel “so desperate that she was ready to ask the help of any one,” and later takes comfort in speaking to the Cheshire Cat, “feeling very glad she had some one to listen to her” (Carroll 27, 91). Marian, too, begins to feel as if there is no one she can talk to, and seems to make her new friend Duncan a sort of Cheshire Cat.

Duncan’s role in *The Edible Woman* remains complex and obscure, though he acts as an intertextual liaison to several of Wonderland’s characters. “In *Wonderland* terms he takes on a variety of aspects,” a “concatenation of Carroll’s characters” (Stow 94; Harkness 106). However, Atwood’s description of him, “sitting hunched forward, his elbows on his knees, his head drawn down into the neck of his dark sweater like a turtle’s into its shell,” most resembles the Mock Turtle (EW 94). In bed with Marian, he retreats under the covers “like a turtle into its shell” (EW 253). “He also speaks in language appropriate to a turtle (referring, as he does, to Marian’s being exposed without her official shell [93] and to his own escape from reality into his shell [257]), and he prefers green for his chair (50) and for his socks” (94) (Harkness 106-7). Duncan and the Mock Turtle both lament their school days, often use puns, and question the meaning of words. They share the common qualities (self-pity, pre-adolescent character, and alienation from others) that Fish points out in his analysis.

Duncan plays other parts in Marian’s Wonderland. For instance, his gauntness, nuzzling, and furry skin identify him with the White Rabbit, as he leads Marian through a “physical landscape into a realm of self-discovery” (Harkness 107). Duncan even attests to his rabbit-like nature: “They kept telling me my ears were too big; but really I’m not human at all. I come from the underground” (EW 141). But “towards the end of the novel he acquires a pathetic dignity rather like that of the White Knight in *Through the Looking Glass*...awkward and sad, but...also gentle, childlike, fanciful and wildly inventive” (Stow 94). Whenever Marian sees Duncan, she recognizes him by the wisp of smoke, his skinniness, and his habit of silently staring at her, all characteristics that liken him to the Caterpillar; and, he plays the part of the Dormouse in the Mad Trevor Party. Furthermore, when Marian watches the cowboy movie, he whispers into her ear while hidden in the dark movie theater, like the Gnat from the *Looking Glass*. Finally, like the Cheshire Cat, Duncan seems to be the only person Marian can talk to comfortably. However, he cannot immediately solve her dilemma, nor provide a panacea for its side effects.

For both of the female protagonists, the side effects of the existential dilemma include loss of appetite, digestion problems, nausea, and severe eating disorders. Alice maintains a somewhat regular eating pattern in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: reaching for an empty jar of

marmalade (27), drinking the DRINK ME bottle and eating the EAT ME cake (31; 33), carrying a box of confits with her for the Caucus-race (49), consuming yet another bottle and many cakes at the White Rabbit's house (57; 63), nibbling on the Caterpillar's mushroom (73; 77), eating at the Mad Tea Party (101), and getting hungry when she spots the tarts at the Knave of Hearts's Trial (143). However, Alice's appetite drastically changes in *Through The Looking Glass*:

Except for two incidents, Alice does go without eating for the rest of the text. To be polite, she chokes down the dry biscuit that the Red Queen offers her (211) and an equally dry piece of bread during the break in the Lion and Unicorn's fight (285). All other food she declines: the White Queen's jam (247); the plum-cake (290); and – not surprisingly – the White Knight's pudding of blotting paper, gunpowder, and sealing wax (305) [Harkness 109]

Similarly, Marian begins with a voracious appetite that decreases steadily into an eating disorder that denotes her identity crisis. On the first day of her journey, she consumes tomato juice, cereal, bread, pudding, lunch with the office virgins, and a dinner at her friend, Clara's. In fact, not a chapter goes by without Marian's mention or consumption of food until the day after Peter proposes to her. Then, like Alice, she begins to pass up food, checking types of food off her edible list until she cannot eat anything.

Both Marian and Alice seem concerned – if not overly so – with the presentation of food. After a scanty breakfast, Marian's first assignment at work involves tasting a new gastronomic invention, instant pudding. Alice listens to the White Knight talking about a similar invention: "Now the cleverest thing of the sort that I ever did...was inventing a new pudding during the meat-course" (Carroll 243). Marian and Alice are then asked to react to the pudding invention, as if connoisseurs or prospective sponsors (and in a sense, they are). In fact, Alice and Marian share a 'don't ask; don't tell' relationship with their food: if they recognize the existence of life in the food, they are immediately disgusted by it. Alice displays such thinking in her reaction to the story, *The Carpenter and the Walrus*: her sympathy for the oysters stems from her regarding them as characters in the story and not foodstuff. Marian takes a similar stance and actually alludes to the shelled critters: "[her stomach] had simply refused to eat anything that had once been, or (*like oysters on the half-shell*) might still be living" (*EW* 193 *emphasis added*). Shortly after this, Marian goes to the museum and sees "an immense wall-screen that was covered with small golden images of the gods and goddesses, arranged around a gigantic central figure: an obese Buddha-like creature," yet another reference to the oysters huddled about the Walrus, waiting to be consumed (*EW* 201).

Alice's and Marian's eating disorders come from thinking of their food as alive. "Marian's empathy for all forms of life – even the mold on her dirty dishes (217) – is a hyperbolic portrayal of one of Alice's experiences in *Through the Looking Glass*" (Harkness 108). At the queens' dinner party, the Red Queen introduces Alice to the Mutton, but when Alice attempts to eat the meat, she is told "it isn't etiquette to cut any one you've been introduced to." Alice hastily responds that she "won't be introduced to the pudding, please," but it is too late: she cannot eat anything at the party (Carroll 262). Earlier in the story, the Gnat also introduces Alice to the various insects of Looking-Glass Land, some of which are made of appetizing dishes.

Marian encounters similar difficulties when eating. She begins to conceive of meat and vegetables as living creatures, and thus cannot eat those foods anymore. She feels the spongy material of cakes and puddings and almost vomits at the thought of them. Furthermore, Len's story of his mother serving him a dead chick instead of an egg stops her from eating eggs in the same way that the Red Queen prevents Alice from eating food. Thus, Marian begins to share Alice's eating disorder, though in Marian's case, her upcoming wedding hastens the development of this disorder as it represents for her a loss of identity-freedom.

Connections between marriage and food pervade *The Edible Woman*, creating in Marian an unconscious fear of a foreboding hegemonic identity prison. Marian's first skipped meal

comes the day after Peter proposes to her. Marian then passes up a steak at her next dinner with Peter. At lunch with the office virgins, Marian longingly watches the others eat as she announces her engagement (EW 119). When Marian goes to the supermarket, the narrator's rhetoric links food and marriage: "Marian was walking slowly down the aisle, keeping pace with the gentle music that swelled and rippled around her. 'Beans,' she said" (EW 187). These connections prove important, as they reveal the essence of Marian's identity crisis; she has become an item of produce for the patriarchal society to consume.

Both Alice and Marian consider themselves "edible women." Alice, because of her small size, fears that the enormous puppy she meets outside the White Rabbit's house may eat her (Carroll 50). Marian fears consumption by the animals of her world, men. As he irons, Duncan talks to Marian about the relationship between production and consumption. The situation worsens when, at Trevor's dinner party, Marian finds herself sandwiched between production and consumption. Fish tells her, "Produce, Produce. Be fruitful and multiply," while Trevor eggs her on to consume the dishes coming from his kitchen (EW 216). This moment of production-consumption crossfire epitomizes Marian's dilemma: she has become a consumable commodity with no agency or purpose outside of the roles she plays for the men around her.

In their Mad Tea Party scenes, *The Edible Woman* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* most obviously coincide. Marian goes to dine with Duncan's "parents," who are really just his roommates, Trevor and the self-proclaimed Carrollian scholar Fish; however, Duncan warns her of the nonsensical natures of graduate students, "They think I'm mad... I think they're mad" (EW 104). Harkness mentions that "in both instances, seating is a concern, and the meals have an air of formality about them which collapses into the ridiculous. Language is a concern to those gathered at both parties." He adds that, like the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, the boys ignore Marian altogether and use her as an audience for their antics.

In light of Marian's eating disorder and her struggle for identity among her many choices, Harkness's interpretation of the similarities between these scenes can be revised. For instance, he sees Marian's indecision about where to sit as an issue of territoriality, as each of the armchairs belongs to one of the roommates and remains cluttered with papers. However, Alice cannot find seating at the Mad Tea Party because all of the place settings have been used already, keeping them perpetually stuck in Tea Time. This parallels Duncan's conception of graduate school: the three roommates keep moving from one literary approach to another, trapped, like Marian, in other peoples' interpretations instead of experiencing the world first-hand. Harkness also casts Fish as the Dormouse because of his storytelling and his half-open eyes. However, he seems to overlook that Duncan remains reticent "between his two elders, drows[ing] like the Dormouse" (Stow, 93). Fish acts more like the March Hare and shares an animalistic name with him, as well. Of course, as Alice does at the Tea Party, Marian leaves the scene when the meal degenerates into a food fight, another obtuse obstacle impeding her existential journey.

To make matters worse, Marian and Alice both begin to suffer from a growing loss of physical autonomy. Early on, Marian has difficulty moving; when she arrives at her office she must 'wade' through the humidity to her desk (EW 11). By the end of the day she feels she is "moving underwater" (EW 26). Soon after, she is reminded of days when she would "become hopelessly entangled in her room at intervals" (EW 34). The next morning, Marian has a poignant dream ("I don't usually remember my dreams") of dissolving into a puddle and becoming transparent (EW 42). This dream surfaces again much later when, as Marian prepares for Peter's party, she suddenly becomes "afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (EW 240). At that party, she even hesitates to touch her fiancé's clothes: "She reached out a hand to touch them, and drew it back: she was almost afraid they would be warm" (EW 252).

Marian's irrational fears grow into a complete loss of autonomy, a schism between the thinking Marian and the acting Marian. In fact, Marian admits she cannot control herself even at the supermarket: "These days, if she wasn't careful, she found herself pushing the cart like a somnambulist, eyes fixed, swaying slightly, her hands twitching with the impulse to reach out

and grab anything with a bright label" (EW 187-8). Her complete dissociation is analogous to Alice's pretending to be two people; Marian "had caught herself lately watching herself with an abstracted curiosity, to see what she would do" (EW 188).

Alice's and Marian's visions of themselves reaffirm their divided selves. As Stow points out, Marian

sees herself mirrored and made small in Peter's eyes as he proposes to her. Before his party she sees her body splitting into three distorted forms, as it is reflected grotesquely in the bath tap. The mirror in Peter's apartment shows her the painted doll that she has become, no longer recognizable as herself (Stow 99).

Thus, Marian's rather inaccurate reflection of both her physical self and her identity only accentuates the confusion of identity. Without a clear conception of her physical form, it stands to reason that Marian cannot fully control her conscious and instinctual motor skills, such as movement or eating, respectively.

Alice undergoes radical body alterations throughout her journey, whereas Marian only *feels* and *imagines* these changes. For instance, when Alice eats the first cake with her elongated neck, she feels as if she's become a telescope and cries. Marian, who remains in her own watery wonderland, has a similar sensation, "as her head emerged periscope-like through the stairwell" (EW 126). When Alice shrinks to the size of the garden door, she looks up at the key through the glass above her; Marian perceives the very evident, though metaphorical, glass ceiling of her office and the impossibility of any possible career advancement (Carroll 24; EW 13). At other points, Alice grows too large for the houses she enters. Marian suffers a similar claustrophobia when speaking to Clara, reminded of "her lack of room and time, her days made claustrophobic with small necessary details" (EW 29). Alice, when exploring Wonderland, constantly resizes herself for various occasions with the help of mushrooms that make her bigger and smaller much as Marian fluctuates among her various hegemonic roles.

Marian also physically changes shapes. In her reflection in a spoon, she sees "herself upside down, with a huge torso narrowing to a pinhead at the handle end. She tilted the spoon and her forehead swelled, then receded. She felt serene" (EW 158). Just as Alice is sometimes very small in Wonderland, Marian seems to shrink at times. For example, upon arriving at Peter's party in her weak emotional state, Marian notices that the lobby seems larger, "much longer than it really was," that there are "gigantic wooden crates and oblong canvas-covered shapes" in the apartment, that the temptation to say nothing has become "great," that her own gestures seem to be "minimizing" her, and that inviting her friends to the party has become a "colossal" mistake. The references to size suggest that Marian feels she has shrunk like Alice. At the museum with Duncan, Marian confronts a symbolic model of Alice (and herself) in one of the mummies. Marian finds Duncan's "favorite womb-symbol" to be "pathetic," "a body so small it looked like that of a child" curled up inside a small house that ends up being more like a small pile of rubble (EW 204). Alice, when she grows too big for the White Rabbit's house, fears that she, too, will remain there, ageless and mummified: "At least there's no room to grow up any more *here*" (Carroll 45).

Above all, the greatest threat to autonomy from the existential dilemma remains the inability of Alice and Marian to make decisions for themselves. Alice recognizes this after dealing with just a few of the animals in Wonderland: "Everybody says 'come on' here...I was never so ordered about before, in all my life, never!" (Carroll 101) In fact, Alice seems to progress through Wonderland only because others tell her where to go and what to do (though she doesn't always listen to them!). The Duchess warns Alice not to think for herself: "You're thinking something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk" (Carroll 96). When the White Rabbit "mistakes her for his maid and demandingly calls out her name - Mary Ann... he tries to treat her like a servant" (Stow 94). The Gryphon in Wonderland and the Red Queen in Looking Glass Land grab Alice and force her to run somewhere. In Wonderland, Alice becomes a doll lacking the freedom

to move about of her own free will; the adults that surround her treat her as a child – a person of limited autonomy.

The people in Marian's wonderland try to restrict her choices as well, in scenes involving references to animals. In Chapter 3, coworkers assign an unwilling Marian to two curious tasks, one dealing with a woman who found a housefly in a product, and another, surveys for Moose Beer (*EW* 23, 20). Then, like the Duchess, Marian's fiancé, Peter, discourages her from speaking her mind. Marian ponders what to say in order to comfort Peter on one of his melancholy nights. However, when she decides to say nothing, Peter calls her "sensible," positively reinforcing her silence (*EW* 66). Gradually, Marian's free will deteriorates, and, after some time, she reflects that she "had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting [Peter] choose for her" (*EW* 159). She begins to feel "like a child's wheeled toy being pulled along by a string," simply following people around, "impelled less by a sense of being able to do anything concrete or helpful than by some obscure herd- or lemming-instinct" (*EW* 233; 234-5). She admits that she has lost control of her situations and that "whatever course it took, there would be nothing she herself could do to prevent it" (*EW* 236). The climax of Marian's journey delivers her into the hands of Duncan: "He was leading her. He was in control" (*EW* 285). He, like the Gryphon with Alice, starts to run, "dragging Marian behind him as if she was a toboggan" (*EW* 286). "Though she hadn't made any decisions she could feel she was about to make one" (*EW* 294). Duncan paradoxically forces her to make a decision on her own, and when autonomy and freedom return to Marian, she reflects on eating a steak: "It still was miraculous to me that I had attempted anything so daring and had succeeded" (*EW* 309).

Marian's friends and acquaintances in *The Edible Woman* aid or obstruct Marian's existential progress in the same way that some of the wily characters of Wonderland do Alice's. As Stow remarks, "Marian is surrounded by people who, unlike her, live in unconsciously grotesque and irrational dream worlds, believing them to be real" (96). Marian's coworkers, the office virgins, furnish an optimal example. Emmy, Lucy, and Millie are, of course, Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie from the Dormouse's Tea Party story. These girls, according to the Dormouse, live at the bottom of a deep well and draw things that begin with the letter M. Marian's friends live in the deep, vaginal cavern of virginity, and are interested only in things that begin with the letter M: men, money, and marriage; to Marian, they represent a rather limited model of femininity.

Marian's friend Clara also has dual citizenship in both Wonderlands. Clara remains most reminiscent of *Alice's* Duchess, a rather large woman nursing a baby in a kitchen redolent of the stale odors of pepper. When Marian visits Clara's house, she notices Clara's massive size, the oppressive atmosphere of the kitchen and what Stow calls Clara's "hopeless vegetable fecundity" (92). The Duchess hands her baby to Alice; when Clara, who later refers to her own baby as "a little pig," does the same to Marian, Marian's roommate Ainsley intercepts it. The Duchess and Clara both keep their own cook, although in Clara's case, he is also her husband (*EW* 225). Of course, as Fish Smythe notes in the comical analysis quoted earlier, the Duchess and Clara influence the thoughts of Alice and Marian toward childrearing and maternity; both Alice, according to the Smythean reading, and Marian reject the notion.

Marian even encounters the major players of *Through the Looking Glass*. The chess pieces, for example, appear as she hastily fakes a game of chess with Duncan in his room to conceal their sexual rendezvous from his roommates. Further references to Wonderland occur in Marian's beauty salon: as she gets her hair styled differently to impress her fiancé's friends, her head resembles a "mutant hedgehog" under the "electric mushroom" machines, and when she is finished she looks like the Walrus from *Through the Looking Glass* with her "two tusk-like spit culrs which projected forward, one on each cheekbone" (*EW* 230). And what would be a modern-day Wonderland without a "wide-eyed," innocent child "holding a plate of cakes," a miniature version of Marian's Alician self she encounters on the staircase of her apartment (*EW* 235)? It is at this moment that Marian's Alician infantilization materializes.

What is the essence of Alice and Marian's problem, their existential dilemma that prevents them from living free and autonomous lives? The problem derives partly from the fact

that neither Alice nor Marian knows who she truly is. Alice, the first time she grows, asks herself, "I wonder if I've changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? ... Who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great puzzle" (Carroll 28). When the Caterpillar asks Alice "Who are you?" Alice replies, "I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then" (Carroll 53). Alice is growing up, and so changing—often daily. As Glenys Stow remarks,

Marian McAlpin has a similar problem of defining her own reality in a puzzling and nonsensical environment. The first line of the novel implies that she is about to change: "I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual." During her explorations of a demented urban world she finds that as a woman she has very little control over her life (90).

When the eating disorder takes over her life, Marian begins to ask the same questions as Alice, wanting "to know what she was becoming, what direction she was taking, so she could be prepared" (EW 225). In fact, as Harkness asserts, "her inability to eat is linked to her inability to take control of her life. When she surrenders control (as she does in her engagement to Peter), her mind and her body split" (108).

The heart of Marian's identity crisis involves role confusion. As Fisher Smythe explains, Alice is simply "trying to find her role... her role as a Woman... One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them, I mean she's really blocked" (EW 212). "Marian too is directed by the social expectations of the people around her, and constantly made aware that as a woman she is expected to define herself by the possession of a man" (Stow 92). Playing so many diverse roles ultimately consumes Marian and deprives her of her autonomy.

A brief survey of *The Edible Woman* reveals the myriad roles imposed on Marian. With Peter, Marian plays a passive, yet adventurous, lover in the bathtub, a silent, but "successful and glittering wife," and a needy woman living vicariously through her husband (EW 59; 257). In Marian's relationship with Duncan, she acts as an experienced lover, a woman who doesn't need male attention, and a prostitute (EW, 278). With the matriarchal downstairs neighbor, Marian pretends to be a virgin, a teetotaler, and a responsible independent woman. Marian pretends she is an available woman when she takes off her engagement ring before Trevor's dinner party and acts as an audience for the clownish grad students as the dinner ensues (EW 210). Marian is also a friend of Len, Ainsley, Clara, and Clara's husband, Joe, a daughter to her rarely mentioned family, and a workingwoman to her supervisor, Mrs. Bogue, and the office virgins. However, these roles have been dictated one by one until Marian loses all sense of self. When Marian, no longer herself but overwhelmed by her many roles as the woman in red, becomes agitated over Peter's taking a picture of her, she finally understands her dilemma: she cannot, will not, be forever immortalized in a photograph as the woman in red and not Marian McAlpin: "Once he pulled the trigger, she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (EW 268).

The solution comes to Marian through Duncan. Whereas Alice somehow finds solace in her identity crisis, Marian seeks escape. She runs away on a one-night adventure with Duncan, and the next day he takes her far from the city to a massive ravine. The symbol here cries *femininity* loudly, but Duncan tells her two things about this fissure: "That's pure clay down there," and "There's a prison down here somewhere, too." To Marian, the bottom of the ravine, the essence of femininity, "didn't look solid, it looked possibly hollow, dangerous, a thin layer of ice, as though if you walked on it you might fall through...she didn't trust the earth. It was the kind of thing that caved in" (EW 289). The soft clay and the prison here represent for Marian the two extremes of femininity. She could remain locked up like Alice, trapped in a tiny house of identity she has outgrown, or get her hands dirty and make something new from the primal clay.

In the end, Marian decides to take up the latter option and, as Ainsley exclaims, "reject her femininity." However, she primarily rejects her role-playing for others. This seems to fix everything: the eating disorders, the lack of autonomy, and the sensation of being in a different world. However, as in *Through the Looking Glass*, the ending leaves the female protagonist confused as to who really controlled the journey. Alice wonders "who it was that dreamed it all," while Marian asks whether it was Duncan or Peter who tried to consume her (Carroll 271). Regardless, Alice and Marian achieve their major objectives: to become inconsumable, to become inedible women.

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