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THE

OSWALD Review

An International Journal
of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
in the Discipline of English

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Given the treachery and deception that pervades Elsinore at the beginning of *Hamlet*, the disparity between appearance and reality emerges as one of the central problems of the play. Because language contributes to this sense of uncertainty, Hamlet becomes distrustful of words: caught between the ghost’s call for revenge and Claudius’s insistence on normality in the kingdom, the prince sees no underlying reason in language and thus dismisses it as a random stream of sounds. For much of the play, logos is absent from linguistic discourse; for Hamlet, words are empty signifiers missing a logical center. Corresponding
with this deconstruction of language is Hamlet’s inability to act against Claudius, the character most responsible for language’s de-centering. Only after the sea voyage, which contains a reversal that reorients Hamlet’s metaphysical center and guides him toward reason, does the prince embrace logos and accept his reality as ordered; in the meantime, the breakdown in logos results in hesitation. References to language and, in particular, to the word “word” thus provide a way to chart Hamlet’s epistemological journey.

The role of language in *Hamlet* has been the subject of some previous critical speculation. In *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet*, James L. Calderwood spends a great deal of time deconstructing the play’s language. Lawrence Danson devotes a chapter in his *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare’s Drama of Language* to a structuralist examination of language in the tragedy. Critics have more generally addressed Shakespeare’s treatment of philosophical themes in an edited volume entitled *Thinking with Shakespeare*, but a discussion of the connection between language and philosophy—so relevant when studying a work of literature—is conspicuously absent. I intend to demonstrate that an understanding of Hamlet’s difficulties with language sheds light on his inability to act against his uncle, an issue over which critics have struggled since the inception of Shakespearean studies. While this essay addresses the perspectives of Calderwood and Danson and also explores the philosophical underpinnings of Shakespeare’s tragedy, it focuses just as much, if not
more, on the prince’s efforts to restructure reality and again embrace logos, an important idea rarely explored by scholars. Let us begin with an overview of this key concept.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, logos is primarily concerned with the intersection of language and reason. Since its inception, the Western philosophical establishment has assumed the inextricable link between language and metaphysical presence. The philosophical importance of “The Word,” whatever its precise definition, extends from ancient thought to Stoic philosophy to Christianity. Beginning with Heraclitus, who introduced the concept of logos into philosophical discourse, Western thinkers have taken for granted language’s role as “a model for the world,” an avenue to logical understanding (568). Plato, for example, claimed that language could function as a human attempt to attach meaning to reality and as a path to spiritual or logical understanding. Hamlet’s attachment to a language grounded in logic invokes the relationship Plato identifies between logos and epistemology. As R. C. Cross claims, for Plato “true belief with the addition of a logos is knowledge, while belief without a logos is not knowledge” (433). Discourse in Claudius’s court fulfills the former function of Platonic language but not the latter: words comprise a socially constructed system of meaning—albeit a distorted meaning, but they do not approach the spiritual/logical realm or the realm of the Forms, which is defined in Plato’s Republic as “the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything…it controls and provides truth and understanding” (189). Claudius himself succinctly
illustrates this discrepancy between language and truth when he finds he cannot pray: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.97-98).

Hamlet’s desire that language express metaphysical truth suggests his admiration for the Stoic interplay between “human logos” and “divine logos,” delineated in the Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy: ideally, the former derives from the latter. Stoic philosophy holds that true logic in language comes when one conceptualizes reality as “one coherent system,” at which point he or she functions properly in the universe (“Logos”). The Encyclopedia of Philosophy points out that the Stoic notion of linguistic truth is essentially a precursor to the Christian treatment of logos, represented by Jesus Christ. For Origen, an early Christian thinker, Christ—functioning as a symbol for language—reveals spiritual mysteries by way of reason (569). Hamlet’s yearning for the Stoic understanding of reality manifests itself in his fondness for Horatio, his Stoic friend. Recognizing the relationship between “human” and “divine” logos, Don Perry Norford argues that, in the play, “the ear provides a channel between [the inner and outer worlds] because it is the medium of the word, which is the logos, the expression of the mind” (567). Logos will eventually enable Hamlet to avenge his father’s death, but it will take a great deal of spiritual and intellectual work to achieve that action. Hamlet must first overcome what the Stoics consider an inevitable progression from chaos to transcendental truth. According to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the
Stoics posited that the universe “periodically perishes in a conflagration that turns all the elements back into fire, from which a new world arises, seeded by seminal logos, a structural principle that directs the cosmogony” (569). To reconnect with logos in the Stoic sense, Hamlet must sort through the confusion that pervades Elsinore, moving from metaphysical violence and chaos to metaphysical unity. Only by re-establishing the center will Hamlet recapture the logos that once provided unity to his existence.

The linguistic indeterminacy that surrounds Hamlet bothers him because, as a student, he expects language to convey reason. Hamlet relies on his “brains,” and the absence of reason in Elsinore’s discourse bewilders him (2.2.588). Claudius’s usurpation of the throne has de-centered not only the power structure of Elsinore but also Hamlet’s faith in metaphysical presence, a product of what Jacques Derrida terms logocentrism, the privileging of language as the possessor of some overarching truth outside of itself. It is helpful to conceptualize discourse in Hamlet as a sort of linguistic de-evolution: during the reign of Hamlet Senior, language fulfilled its role as an accurate conveyor of truth. When the king—who represents goodness and truth—dies, a disruption in the organic unity of language within Elsinore occurs: the succession of Claudius corresponds to the replacement of knowledge with epistemological chaos. In poststructuralist terms, the play moves from a state of metaphysical presence to one of absence, with Claudius challenging any notion of reality that Hamlet once held. Under Claudius, life is reduced to mere appearance: words
add layers of deceptive signification to discourse rather than providing an avenue to objective reality. Claudius, then, functions as a figure of metaphysical and linguistic destruction; because of Hamlet’s logocentrism, Claudius’s language-based deception translates into an emptying of fundamental truth. Faced with his uncle’s reversal of the truth/untruth binary, the prince must dismantle the erroneous signification system and restore the kingdom to a level of reality where language conveys truth rather than obfuscates.

In the midst of the deception at Elsinore, Hamlet can no longer privilege speech as a source of logos. His comments regarding language clearly convey his distrust of words. Indeed, his attitude toward language for much of the play is diametrically opposed to logos. This skepticism stems from the disjointed sense of reality at Elsinore, the absence of reason and, by extension, of logos. When Polonius—who tries to ingratiate himself to Hamlet—asks the prince what he is reading, Hamlet’s reply—“words, words, words”—suggests that, at least in the Danish court, Hamlet considers language meaningless because it cannot legitimately convey truth (2.2.193). Hamlet tells Gertrude that the queen in “The Murder of Gonzago” will “keep her word,” a sarcastic comment on the unreliability of verbal oaths (3.2.229). In the closet scene, Hamlet claims that his mother’s marriage vows to King Hamlet were little more than “a rhapsody of words” (3.4.50). Hamlet’s remarks indicate that he views language not as a valid expression of reason but as a series of empty signifiers. Elsinore’s questionable discourse leads him to believe that systems of language are not inherently
tied to logos; according to Lawrence Danson, Hamlet is unable to “understand the language of the court—a language which . . . has lost its necessary relationship to a world it no longer adequately describes” (28). Prior to his father’s murder, Hamlet could assume that language accurately conveyed some underlying meaning; Claudius’s court, on the other hand, undermines language’s validity and presents an epistemological challenge that Hamlet struggles to overcome.

Part of Hamlet’s trouble stems from his tendency to conceptualize people and situations in binary terms. When he first encounters the ghost, for example, he regards it with an either/or mentality:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com’st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee. I’ll call thee
> Hamlet,
> King, father, royal Dane. (1.4.40-45)

After considering interpretations that are binary opposites—the Ghost as human or demonic, good or evil, Hamlet concludes that he has seen his father’s spirit and then indulges in further binary thinking: the ghost’s benevolence versus Claudius’s malevolence. Hamlet’s interpretation of the ghost suggests that he believes in linguistic stability, the idea that the signifier and signified are reliably linked. But while Hamlet struggles to establish this signifier/signified
connection, Claudius confounds the binary by presenting himself as a noble and proficient king who is concerned for his nephew. Indeed, Claudius’s opening speech reveals his desire to maintain order and peace in the kingdom through eloquence. Discussing his hasty marriage to Gertrude, Claudius claims that he, “as ‘twere with a defeated joy— / With an auspicious and a dropping eye, / With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, / In equal scale weighing delight and dole,” has taken Hamlet’s mother for a wife (1.2.10-13). Claudius recognizes the importance of binary thinking, making sure that he mourns sufficiently and thus presents himself as a well-balanced and sensitive ruler. According to Danson, Claudius wants “to make language swallow up irreconcilable differences” and thus smudge the line between appearance and reality (27). The king is fully aware that his courtly, ornate language has successfully covered up his crime: “The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art, / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word!” (3.1.52-54).

Hamlet’s problem, then, is a lack of knowledge: he is left in a state of deconstruction rather than logos because he does not know whose words to trust. According to James Calderwood, “in place of Hamlet’s implied and Aristotle’s explicit law of the excluded middle . . . we have Shakespeare’s law of the included middle,” or the presence of uncertainty within the play (xiv). Elsinore’s discourse does not fulfill the prince’s logocentric expectation of an objective reality grounded in reason; Claudius’s dishonesty complicates the good/evil binary in which Hamlet indulges
and thus increases the epistemological difficulties the prince endures. The ghost’s nocturnal wanderings also prove to be problematic; while Hamlet is more concerned about the ghost’s ontological existence than the validity of its words, the spirit’s presence certainly increases the confusion surrounding Elsinore.

Because Hamlet senses the unreliability of language, he deemphasizes its value in his own conversations and actions. The prince does not believe that words can properly express his sorrow over his father’s death, telling Gertrude that “windy suspirations of forced breath” cannot approach the level of his mourning (1.2.79). By reducing speech to its simplest physical element, Hamlet is making a forceful statement about language’s inefficacy. Falstaff, another Shakespearean character wary of language, summarizes Hamlet’s attitude well in *1 King Henry IV*: “What is honor? A word. What is in that word ‘honor’? What is that ‘honor’? Air. A trim reckoning!” (5.1.133-35). Hamlet and Falstaff realize that a word—the signifier—cannot do justice to a concept—the signified; indeed, language can just as easily mislead as clarify.

For Hamlet, speech functions as a receptacle of dishonesty and deception, not as a conveyor of reason. Because there is no spiritual or intellectual substance underlying the machinations of characters like Claudius and Guildenstern, Hamlet acts in a similarly empty way, affecting his “antic disposition” and babbling to throw others off his trail of revenge (1.5.181). It is worth noting that the prince’s diversionary madness, the only strategy he
can conceive amidst the uncertain environment of Elsinore, provides him a level of paradoxical stability. After all, he provides clues for his strategic madness throughout the play, telling Guildenstern that he is “but mad north-north-west” (2.2.378) and admitting to his mother that he is simply “mad in craft” (3.4.195). Hamlet’s fictional insanity, in other words, functions as a means of constancy in the de-centered Elsinore. Since other characters are willing to empty language of its value, Hamlet follows suit. This tendency toward kenosis—a term that, according to the New Catholic Encyclopedia, originated in theological circles to convey the theory that “the divine Word relinquished some or all of His divinity in becoming man” but that poststructuralist scholars later adapted to convey the inherent emptiness of language—is most apparent when the prince renounces his love for Ophelia (143). When she reminds him of his previous romantic statements, he tells her that “we are arrant knaves all; believe none of us” (3.1.130). Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia indicates his alienation from logos. Hamlet did love Ophelia; her claim that he uttered “words of . . . sweet breath composed” suggests that his romantic language was once real and substantive (3.1.119). But because words have lost all meaning, Hamlet feels that no one, including Ophelia, is trustworthy in the kingdom.

Hamlet internalizes the absence of logos at Elsinore to the point that he even doubts the underlying truth of his own language. After the ghost demands Claudius’s murder, Hamlet claims that revenge is at the top of his agenda, even writing down a “word” of commitment in his diary.
(1.5.111). But because he is caught between the demands of
the ghost and the linguistic façade of purity that Claudius
erects, the prince cannot act. Hamlet “must like a whore
unpack [his] heart with words” instead of physically seeking
revenge (3.1.586). He may tell the acting troupe to “suit
the action to the word, / The word to the action,” but this
request is Hamlet’s projection of his own inability to achieve
a balance of speech and action (2.2.17-18). In this sense
the Player who delivers the Pyrrhus speech acts as a foil
to Hamlet: the Player’s ability to “force his soul so to his
own conceit” contrasts heavily with Hamlet’s hesitation and
ineffectiveness (2.2.553). The Player thus participates in
an interesting dichotomy: Hamlet’s feelings are real, but he
cannot translate them into words; the player’s emotions, so
easily expressed in language, are in reality contrived.

Hamlet fails to realize that the act of theater merely
reinforces the air of linguistic illusion in Elsinore; the
players are fulfilling a role, not embracing logos. Even after
observing Claudius’s reaction to the “Murder of Gonzago,”
Hamlet’s supposedly bona fide evidence for his uncle’s guilt,
the prince continues to suffer from the same disjunction
between language and objective reality. Hamlet’s signifying
is still broken because he does not know whether the
king reacted to the play with fear or guilt—after all, “The
Murder of Gonzago” presents a death threat, arising because
Lucianus is nephew to the king. According to Aaron Landau,
Hamlet’s acceptance of theater as a form of logical discourse
is problematic because “playacting, which Hamlet has turned
all of a sudden into a ‘decisive’ epistemological tool, had
in fact been deprecated” by the prince earlier in the play, especially during his soliloquy upon the arrival of the acting troupe (227). So while Hamlet tells Horatio that he will “take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” after observing Claudius’s reaction, he still cannot take substantive action against the king (3.2.284-85). Before he confronts Gertrude, he notes, “how in my words somever she be shent, / To give them seals never my soul consent!” (3.3.395-96). Consequently, when Hamlet implicates Gertrude in King Hamlet’s murder, his “word” to her is just that: there is no real intention of action behind his language because the king’s reaction has not furnished him with the necessary evidence for revenge (3.4.31). No matter how he “reword[s]” the matter, Hamlet has no metaphysical center from which to proceed (3.4.150). In fact, in his final injunction to her (“one word more, good lady”) he demands that she continue to keep his secret: in essence, he is using language to further blur the distorted reality of Elsinore (3.4.187).

The restoration of logos in Hamlet’s world depends on the rediscovery of a metaphysical center in his existence. For much of the play, Hamlet operates outside the boundaries of logic because it is not conducive to Elsinore and the empty signifiers of the court’s discourse. Elsinore’s skewed reality has created fragmentation within Hamlet: because he is unable to reconcile the competing words of Claudius and the ghost, Hamlet is unable to unite reason and action. While he realizes that God, who endowed humans with “such large discourse” (4.4.37), did not mean for “that capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused,” he
balks because he lacks the very reason he addresses (4.4.39-40). Hamlet must achieve psychological wholeness before he can embrace logos and interact properly in his exterior environment.

The experience that fundamentally changes Hamlet’s perception of his existence and brings him closer to logos is the sea voyage he undertakes in the fifth act. Hamlet’s discovery of Claudius’s letter to the English king demanding his execution provides the prince with the stable sign he needs to return to logos. In a rather literal illustration of Jacques Lacan’s “Name-of-the-Father” concept, which stresses the patriarchal underpinnings of metaphysical presence, Hamlet returns to the linguistic and intellectual center embodied in Hamlet Senior by using his father’s seal to replace the letter. Hamlet’s subsequent encounter with the pirates provides a further revelation about the character of Claudius: while his words suggest that he is innocent of murder, the pirate incident proves to Hamlet that a person like his uncle can be bad but pretend to be good. According to Matthew A. Fike, Hamlet’s abduction by pirates amounts to a confrontation with his Jungian shadow: “the pirates are shadow projections with whom he effectively negotiates during his sea voyage.” Fike also notes that the thieving pirates, ostensibly a group of bad people, do a good deed by returning Hamlet to Denmark (146). Hamlet’s newfound knowledge essentially reverses the black-and-white binary that a person is definitively either good or evil. He finally understands Claudius’s posturing for what it is: just as pirates who are bad can do a good deed, Claudius—who seems to
be a good and just king—can also be an attempted murderer. The sea voyage allows Hamlet to reorient his position in the truth/untruth binary: finally understanding Claudius’s malevolence, the prince now swings toward the opposite end of the epistemological spectrum.

Hamlet’s psychological integration also allows him to cast off his façade of insanity; consequently, his language takes on a new significance. Even before he returns, Hamlet sends Horatio a letter asserting the power of language, claiming that he has “words to speak in [his] ear will make [him] dumb” (4.6.24-25). It is clear that Hamlet has a new grasp of language as he stands over Ophelia’s grave. Whereas he disavowed his love for Ophelia at the nadir of his deconstructive phase, he is now able to mourn her death openly and truthfully. His language of affection is a sharp departure from the emotional constipation he expressed in his soliloquies. Hamlet now can “force his soul to his own conceit” (2.2.553): “Forty thousand brothers, / Could not with all their quantity of love, / Make up my sum” (5.1.272-74).

The prince also achieves a spiritual understanding that brings him closer to the Stoic integration of “divine” and “human” logos, an achievement that will allow him to function properly in the universe. Hamlet assures Horatio that “[t]here’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11). Providence, in other words, provides an overall comic shape to existence despite humanity’s manifold errors. Having wrestled with uncertainty and overcome it, Hamlet’s epistemological
struggle takes on positive value and he swings toward faith rather than disbelief. Hamlet’s new attitude, embodied in his declaration that “the readiness is all” (5.2.220), suggests that he is willing to wait for the divinely inspired opportunity to avenge his father. The evidence for a fully justified revenge comes when Hamlet realizes that Claudius has poisoned Gertrude. Not only does Hamlet act decisively against his uncle, but he accomplishes his revenge under the dictates of reason and Providence. He has aligned his actions with God’s will and thus returned to logos. In this sense, Hamlet fulfills the Old Testament conception of logos; according to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Revelations treats logos “as eschatological Victor and Judge. The Logos of God exterminates the unjust” (760). By recapturing logos and aligning his will with that of God, Hamlet can capitalize on the opportunity for revenge and still maintain a clear conscience. Revenge for Hamlet now represents a return to structure rather than an affirmation of bloodshed.

Hamlet’s reacquisition of a spiritual and intellectual center corresponds to his renewed faith in words and signifying. Language is no longer a system of signs that conveys nothing beyond its structure; rather, words possess a transcendent quality that goes hand in hand with reason. The fact that Hamlet asks Horatio—a Stoic—to “report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” suggests that Hamlet’s revenge against Claudius signals the restoration of logos in Denmark (5.2.341-42). Danson argues that the revenge constitutes “a fully meaningful linguistic and gestural expression”; in other words, Hamlet’s joining of
word and action legitimizes the role of language in the play (49). Of course, the prince understands by the time of his death that one cannot automatically privilege language as a conveyor of metaphysical presence and reason; words can be easily emptied of meaning and binary thinking can be confounded. Nevertheless, Hamlet has moved from a state of deconstruction to one of spiritual acceptance and, ultimately, an adherence to logos.
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John Milton and the Spirit of Capitalism

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In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber assigns the following task to his readers:

Consider, for example, the conclusion of the Divine Comedy, where the poet in Paradise is struck dumb as, all desires fulfilled, he contemplates the divine mysteries. Then compare this with the conclusion of the poem that has become known as the ‘Divine Comedy of Puritanism.’ (33)

This comparison, writes Weber, reveals an “ethical peculiarity” (33) which lies at the heart of the capitalist
spirit: the uniquely Protestant conception of the calling. In this paper, I aim to expand on Weber’s reference to *Paradise Lost* through an analysis of the poet’s biography. I argue that Weber’s “spirit” of capitalism is located in Milton’s lifelong “obsess[ion] with realizing his own vocation” (DiSalvo 262). For clarity of presentation, I divide my argument into two parts. First, I briefly examine Weber’s conception of the capitalist spirit. Second, using Weber’s ideas, I investigate the development of Milton’s literary vocation through a reading of *Paradise Regained*.

I begin with the central component of Weber’s spirit of capitalism: the calling or the *beruf*. “We shall…use the expression ‘spirit of capitalism’ for that attitude which, in the pursuit of a calling, strives systematically for profit for its own sake…” [emphasis in the original] (Weber 19). Accepting as true Weber’s assertion that the development of this spirit was contingent on “a long, slow process of education” (17) and not the necessary result of a historical dialecticism, I read Weber’s essay as an investigation into the historical and philosophical origins of the *beruf*.

Whereas Catholics held that specific individuals were called by God to serve in the clergy, Protestants (who characteristically distrusted ecclesiastical authority) believed that God called all human beings to serve. The idea was that every individual was assigned a “task set by God” (Weber 28) and was liable for its performance. As translated in the Geneva Bible, 1 Corinthians 7:20 reads: “Let every man abide in the same vocation wherein he was called.”
The concept of vocation was expanded by John Calvin to include the “service of the secular life of the community” (Weber 75). Pragmatically, the result of this expansion was that every moment of the Calvinist’s life—including those when she or he was laboring in a secular vocation—became an opportunity to serve God. Accordingly, “wasting time” became “the first and most serious of all sins” (Weber 106). When combined with the Protestant doctrine of predestination, this ethic led to the “‘sanctification by works’ raised to the level of a system” (Weber 80). In contrast to the Catholic God, who required devotion only at mass and various other set times, service to Calvin’s God required active, tireless, and systematic labor in a *beruf*.

The extent of the Calvinist’s success (or failure) in a secular *beruf* served the glory of God and indicated her or his *status gratiae*. Worldly achievements were a matter of practical—and, more importantly, moral—significance. As Weber notes, “there has perhaps never been a more intensive form of religious appraisal of moral *action* than that which Calvinism engendered in its followers” [emphasis in original] (80). Calvinism was the vital historical and philosophical link between Protestantism and what Weber calls the “spirit” of capitalism. Not only did it integrate a believer’s entire life, including her or his vocational labor, into a systemic ideology, but it also morally sanctioned resolute and dedicated labor in a secular *beruf*. This systemization and moralization of secular labor is what Weber finds in the eighteenth-century writings of Benjamin
Franklin and subsequently labels the rationalization of the Protestant ethic.

In the second part of my paper, I wish to show that I find this rationalized ethic—the historical and ideological root of modern capitalism, according to Weber—in Milton himself, whatever his personal religious beliefs were. My starting point is John Rogers’ comment that “the problem of what a calling actually is and how one actually knows one has a calling is a problem that pulsates somewhere beneath most of the lines of poetry that Milton writes” (“Credible Employment”). With this in mind, I read *Paradise Regained* as an autobiographical work to show that Milton, like the Son, was engaged in a lifelong quest to fulfill his *beruf*.

The theme of *Paradise Lost* anticipates the theme of *Paradise Regained*: if “man’s first disobedience” (*PL*, I.1) was responsible for the loss of paradise, then only “man’s firm obedience” (*PR*, I.4) can regain it. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton translates the virtue of obedience into a ‘mini-epic’ by altering the story of the temptation from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Milton’s adaptation, the occasion which initiates the plot is not the mysterious Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness, as it is in the New Testament, but God’s act of *calling*. In the poem’s first elocution, Satan notes God’s calling at the Son’s baptism, which lays the framework for the epic’s further development: “Who this is we must learn” (I.91). In Aristotelian terms, God’s calling is the occasion which does not follow from anything else (God is *causa sui*) and from which a
subsequent event naturally occurs (the Son is led into the wilderness by the Spirit).

But it seems to be important for Milton to show that the Son knew that he was called *before* the moment when he was literally called by God at the Jordan. Hence, the Son reveals in his opening speech that at an early age he believed that he was “born to promote all truth”: “When I was yet a child…/…all my mind was set/Serious to learn and know” (PR I.201-205). Milton also modifies the familiar story of Luke 2:46-50 by adding that Jesus went to the temple not only to learn but also to instruct the teachers there (PR I.212-213). Moreover, Mary has a reasonable explanation for telling her son the story of his nativity: she “perceived” his “growing thoughts” (PR I.227). From these passages, it is clear that the Son knew that he was called to serve God, even though he did not know his particular vocation.

After hearing the story of his birth, the Son rereads the books of the Old Testament and concludes: “[O]f whom they spake / I am” (I.262-263). In other words, the Son learns that he is called to be the Messiah. The pronunciation by God at the Son’s baptism confirms this discovery:

But as I rose out of the laving stream,
Heaven open’d her eternal doors, from whence
The Spirit descended on me like a Dove,
And last the sum of all, my Father’s voice,
Audibly heard from Heav’n, pronounc’d me his,
Me his beloved Son, in whom alone
He was well pleas’d; by which I knew the time
Now full, that I no more should live obscure,
But openly begin, as best becomes
The Authority which I deriv’d from Heaven.
(I.280-289)

The voice of the Father “sums” the childhood experiences of the Son and confirms the Son’s calculation. At this the Son feels “the time / Now full” to “openly begin” his work. Though he already knew that he was called to serve God and even knew that he was called to become the Messiah, it was not yet time to clock-in and begin working until this particular moment.

The question of how the Son discovered his calling remains to be answered and brings me back to the “problem” that Rogers identifies as characteristically Milton’s. Again, I refer to the Son’s opening speech. Led into the desert by the Spirit, the Son begins:

O what a multitude of thoughts at once
Awakn’d in me swarm, while I consider
What from within I feel my self, and hear
What from without comes often to my ears
(PR I.196-199)

I read these lines as a description of the Son’s epistemology. There seems to be the following incongruity in the Son’s statement: if the Son’s thoughts are “awakn’d,” then it stands to reason that there is an awakener that is some entity other than the Son himself that is present, some external force. Yet, the Son is in a place of “solitude…far from track of men”
(PR I.191). Without a doubt, the Son is describing a process of introspection during which he experiences an *internal* awakening. The awakener is the Spirit which led him into the desert, which is *inside of* the Son. Thus, he considers “what from within” before he hears “what from without.” In this particular instance, the Son acquires the practical knowledge of how to become the Messiah. By the same process of internal awakening, the Son was able to learn of his calling by God at an early age. The Son’s approach to the acquisition of knowledge is rationalistic: he learns things *a priori* when his consciousness is awakened by a “multitude of thoughts.”

As I mentioned above, I read *Paradise Regained* as the autobiographical narrative of an individual on a quest for self-identification. Milton translated certain aspects of the development of his own career into the story of the Son. The Son’s dilemma—discovering, understanding, and fulfilling his *beruf*—is identical with the unifying concern of Milton’s life. As Dayton Haskin notes in *Milton’s Burden of Interpretation*, the poet struggled to find his “place” in the scriptures (à la Saint Paul and Augustine) and ultimately settled on Matthew’s Parable of the Talents. Similarly, the Son of *Paradise Regained* struggles to find his place in the Hebrew Bible and ultimately finds it in the pronouncement of Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3:14: *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (“I am that I am”). Consequently, when the Son reads the books of the Old Testament, he discovers: “[O]f whom they spake / I am” (PR I.262-263). Later, during his debate with Satan, he again invokes Yahweh’s exhortation: “I seek not mine, but
his / who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am” (PR III.106-107). Both Milton and the Son face an interpretative burden with Biblical texts, each struggling to find his respective “place.” We should not be surprised to find Milton projecting his own anxieties onto the Son of God. He had, after all, already labeled himself prophetic in “Lycidas” and compared himself to Isaiah in *The Reason of Church Government*. Furthermore, as John Rogers rightly remarks in his lecture on *Samson Agonistes*, “there is an unparalleled self-absorption at the heart of Milton’s writing.”

Like the Son, Milton seems to have known at an early age that he was called to serve God. In *Anno Aetatis 19*, Milton wished for his mind to accomplish the following task:

```plaintext
soare
Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav’ns
dore
Look in, and see each blissful Deitie
How he before the thunderous throne doth lie. (32-36)
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It is the English language that will help Milton “soare” above the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe and “look in” the door of Heaven. Presumably, these are the same “eternal doors” that open at the Son’s baptism in *Paradise Regained* (I.281). The “soaring spirit” of ambition is again invoked at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* (I.14) and encouraged by Mary in *Paradise Regained* (I.230). It also appears in the introduction to Book 2 of the *Reason of Church Government*, where Milton describes his ambition to be “an interpreter
and relater of the best and sagest things among [his] own citizens” (840).

Like the Son, Milton discovers his calling through an introspective, rationalistic process. Also in the introduction to Book 2 of The Reason of Church Government, the poet writes:

I began this farre to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not lesse to an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joyn’d with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die. These thoughts at once possest me…[emphasis added]. (840)

If I take Milton to be using his words in their Latinate sense, then I find him here using “propensity” (from propendere, meaning “to lean or hang forward, to incline”) to denote “a leaning or inclination.” Milton’s “strong propensity of nature,” therefore, is his natural leaning or inclination, by which he means his “one talent which is death to hide”: his poetic talent (Sonnet 19, 3). Milton’s “inward prompting,” which is the same experience as the Son’s internal awakening, calls him to combine his God-given poetic talent with labor and intent study, to become a great poet and “leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die.”

Here Andrew Milner’s characterization of Milton
as rationalistic is correct in so far as Milton seems to have believed that he learned of his calling \textit{a priori}, i.e. “inwardly,” or prior to and independent of sensory experience. Christopher Hill also agrees when he labels Milton a rationalist in regards to Biblical interpretation. To be unambiguous, I am using the concept ‘rationalism’ in an epistemological sense, whereas Milner and Hill primarily use it to describe a historical and philosophical movement based on “the discrete individual…who decides what is true and what is untrue” (Milner 53). The two uses are obviously correlated but not exactly in agreement.

It is clear then that Milton experienced an internal, \textit{irrational} awakening which called him to serve God through secular labor in a poetic \textit{beruf}. Milton \textit{rationalized} (in the Weberian sense) this unexplainable phenomenon by systematizing and moralizing it. Consequently, in the Miltonic worldview, God is a “Taskmaster” (Sonnet 7) and the poet’s task is an “\textit{opus divinum}” (\textit{Ad Patrem}, 17). In order to write an epic greater than those of antiquity, Milton had to intently study the sum of all thought and knowledge that preceded him and then add some novel thought of his own. While waiting for his “inward ripeness” (Sonnet 7), he had to remain patient, temperate, and obedient—all three of which were virtues of the Son. Indeed, Milton constantly wrote of his fear that he was wasting time (Sonnet 7, Sonnet 19, “On Time,” “Lycidas”). Furthermore, an overtly self-conscious sense of Bloomian belatedness can be found in Book 9 of \textit{Paradise Lost}, where the poet remarks that the “Subject for Heroic song / Pleas’d me long choosing, and
beginning late” (IX.25-26).

At an early age, Milton was “possessed” by what he knew to be his “portion” in life: his calling to serve God through his secular labor as a poet. By examining the Miltonic canon through the lens of Weber’s ideas, I have found an integrated body of literature which is engaged in a search for “the time / Now full” (PR, I.286-287). I conclude that Weber’s “ethical peculiarity” (33) is precisely that idiosyncrasy which is located in the ethic of Milton. The ideas which Weber developed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* are supported not only by the conclusion of the “Divine Comedy of Puritanism” but also by the entire life narrative of the poet. This life narrative is told vicariously through the Son in *Paradise Regained* and pervades the poetry and prose of John Milton.
Notes

1 See Guillory for the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the terms “calling” and “vocation” (from the Latin vocare, or “to call”). I wish to ignore this theological discussion for the purposes of my paper since it is relatively clear what Weber and Milton held to be the meaning of these terms.

2 See the section entitled “Milton’s Christian Doctrine” in Hill (233-334) for a discussion of Milton’s religious beliefs. I want to emphasize here that Milton need not be a Calvinist in order to exhibit the “Protestant Ethic.” Hill notes that “[Milton’s] conscience found the Protestant ethic in the Bible” (248).

3 All quotations from Milton’s works come from the Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon edition.
Works Cited


Revisions to Realist Representation
in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Heart of Darkness*.

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George Henry Lewes considers the aim of realism to be “the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth” (37) and identifies its central mode as “sympathy with the internal life” (38). For George Eliot, this in turn initiates “the extension of our sympathies” and so cultivates “the raw material of moral sentiment” (29). Their views exemplify nineteenth-century literary realism, a genre which explores moral themes through a sense of “verisimilitude” in the representation of setting, character, and event, while
retaining the “credibility” of a “potential reality, given that we apply our expectations...about the real world to fictional happenings” (Leech and Short 127). A range of formal conventions developed to achieve these effects. Realist narrative often features an omniscient, third-person narrator, who in largely non-figurative language offers an authoritative, objective view of events, using an empirical description of setting to convey a plausible world. Characters have recognizable names and social relationships, and they are individualized through appearance, behavior, and dialogue. However, many critics identify the assumption of conventional literary realism to be what Raymond Williams calls the ideology of the “knowable community” (125). Williams argues that realism presupposes an empirical perspective from which an objective “Reality” and “Truth” can be apprehended by writers and readers, that “knowable and therefore known relationships compose and are part of a wholly known social structure,” and that literary realism thereby assumes a “mutually applicable social and moral code” (123).

Both Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad express dissatisfaction with conventional methods of realist representation, an attitude both in response to, and symptomatic of, a wider scepticism in the 1890s for moral and political certainties. In “The Science of Fiction” Hardy challenges realism’s empirical representation, arguing that “sight for the finer qualities of existence...[is] not to be acquired by the outer senses alone” (“Science” 103). Focusing on the artist, he stresses formal innovation,
claiming that to represent societal change (and changing views of society) and to be artistically convincing, “narrative must adjust itself to the new alignment” (102), accomplished through a creative “faculty for selection and cunning manipulation” (101). Only then, Hardy believes, was fiction capable of “reproducing...the phantasmagoria of experience with infinite and atomic truth” (102), with the resultant art “more truthful than truth” (101). Similarly, in his “Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus” Conrad stresses the sensual over an empirical apprehension of reality, arguing that the writer appeals “through the senses...[to] that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom [or] temperament” (“Preface” 118-119). Focusing on the reader, he claims that his task “by the power of the written word [is] to make you hear...feel...before all, to make you see” (120). Anticipating modernist representation, he locates meaning in “the rescued fragment...[to] reveal the substance of its truth” (120) and, in turn, to convey the “conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts” (119). With these ideas in mind, a close-reading of selected scenes from Far from the Madding Crowd and Heart of Darkness reveals how each writer modifies the literary conventions of realism. Analyzing their respective narrative strategies and their use of literary conventions from non-realist genres such as pastoral and gothic literature illuminates, in turn, their representation of setting and character. Particular reference is made to the critical perspectives of Raymond Williams and Edward Said, both critics who explore the relationship between the formal and thematic strategies of the novels.
The opening chapter of *Far from the Madding Crowd* exemplifies Hardy’s subtle revisions to the conventional omniscient narrative of realist fiction. Initially, the description of Gabriel Oak suggests an empirical narrative perspective, where a range of adjectives such as “low,” “tight,” and “large” are used to catalogue details of Oak’s appearance, including the “diverging wrinkles” of his eyes and his “low crowned felt hat” (*Crowd* 9). In addition, narrative omniscience is suggested through authoritative generalizations such as the assertions that Gabriel Oak is “at the brightest period of masculine growth” (10) and that he is “a man of misty views...[who] thought of... dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon” (9). However, this impression of a stable, reliable narrative point of view is undercut throughout the chapter in a number of ways. Firstly, as he considers “[Oak’s] character as it stood in the scale of public opinion,” the narrator reveals that “when his friends and critics were in tantrums, he was considered rather a bad man; when they were pleased...a good man” (9). The observation concedes both the presence of different perspectives within the world of the novel and the importance of social opinion in the construction of character identity, each emphasized through the range of signifying titles for Oak; “Farmer Oak...Gabriel...Mr Oak” (9). Secondly, the narrator goes on to undermine the authority of his own perspective by conceding that “some thoughtful persons, who had seen him...on a certain December morning...might have regarded Gabriel Oak in other aspects than these” (10). Here, the narrator accepts
the possibility of conflict between subjective points of view. Thirdly, the narrator reveals the illusory nature of his apparent omniscience as he questions Bathsheba’s motivation for peering into her looking-glass: “What possessed her to indulge in such a performance...whether the smile began as a factitious one...nobody knows” (12). This admission concedes the limitations facing any attempt to acquire an objective knowledge of reality. All that can be concluded is that “it ended certainly in a real smile” (12). Although this conclusion echoes the empirical description of Oak’s smile that opened the chapter, the word “real” here suggests that the roots of what constitutes “reality” lie within, in this instance available only to Bathsheba, and furthermore undermines the claims of knowledge gained from the presumably unadulterated empirical description that characterizes conventional realist narrative. Oak’s own inference from Bathsheba’s smile is conveyed through narrative focalization as he imagines “her thoughts...[of] likely dramas in which men would play a part” (12). Although the narrator subsequently concedes that “this was but conjecture” and that it would be “rash to assert that intention had any part in them” (12), the incident illustrates the possibility that a degree of creativity is present in any interpretation of reality. That this creativity is often an unconscious act is hinted at by the fact that Oak is at this point unaware of the prophetic nature of his inference. Finally, the narrator levels the perspectives of humans and animals, noting that Bathsheba’s actions have been performed “in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds, and
unperceived farmer”; he simultaneously denies both his own perspective and that of the reader by claiming that Oak and the birds “were alone its spectators” (12). Overall, these varied revisions to omniscient narrative show how Hardy undermines the empirical perspective upon which realist representation operates and, in turn, establishes the spatial shifts in perspective which are then used throughout the novel to represent character.

The fracturing of perspective within the novel’s third-person narrative mirrors what Raymond Williams identifies as a conflict within Hardy himself, namely between “the educated observer and the passionate participant” (132). Instead of reading Hardy’s primary concern as “the impact of an urban alien on the ‘timeless pattern’ of English rural life” (129), he instead stresses “the problem of the relation between customary and educated life...feeling and thought” (126). Mirroring the rejection by omniscient realist narrative of idealism, Williams sees education as “needed urgently where custom is stagnation or where old illusions are repeated as timeless truths”; for Williams, education can provide “a way of looking at that life which can see other values beyond it” (127). However, he ultimately saw neither perspective as “sufficiently articulate...the educated...limited in humanity; the customary thwarted by ignorance” (133), a sentiment recognized by Hardy himself in his concession that “[n]o single pen can treat exhaustively of this” (“Science” 101).

Something of this conflict between custom and education is found in the description of Oak’s silver fob,
itself of ambiguous status: “a watch as to shape...a small clock as to size” (Hardy, Crowd 9-10). While the watch as object is aligned through age with the customary, “being several years older than Oak’s grandfather” (10), the clock as a recorder of measured “time” is aligned with the rational, educated perspective. This dichotomy is emphasized in the observation that the clock hands “had the peculiarity of going either too fast or not at all” (10). However, Oak overcomes the “stopping peculiarity...by thumps and shakes” and the fact that the “smaller of its hands...slipped round on the pivot” with recourse to “comparisons with and observations of the sun and stars” (10). Oak’s sensitive and varied approach to ensuring the reliability of his broken watch clarifies Hardy’s view of literary representation. Hardy considers the “sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all its manifestations” as the crucial gift of the “more accurate delineator of human nature” (“Science” 103). Such an artist he viewed as superior to those “with twice his powers and means of external observation, but without that sympathy” (103), an approach he saw as the basic methodology of realist representation. However, Oak also monitors time by “pressing his face close to...his neighbours’ windows when passing by their houses, till he could discern the...timekeepers within” (Hardy, Crowd 10), an activity which can be read as dramatizing realism’s reliance upon the “knowable community” (Williams 125). Either way, the image of Oak’s fob does foreground the complexity of conflict within the novel between “customary and educated life” (Williams 126) and, by extension, Hardy’s
dissatisfaction with the attempt by conventional literary realism to represent reality.

Despite a possible alignment of the customary with the non-empirical within the novel, Hardy is well aware that “real perception of tradition is available only to the man who has read about it” (Williams 134-135) and that “the sense of what is now called the ‘timeless’...the sense of history...is a function of education” (134). What Williams calls Hardy’s “complicated sense of past and present” (135) finds expression through temporal shifts in narrative perspective, a device which modifies the stable omniscience of conventional realist narrative and which was used in particular by Hardy to convey setting. In Chapter XXII of the novel, the Great Barn is described as a place where “the spirit of the ancient builders was at one with the spirit of the beholder,” with the educated perspective of the narrator suggested through his knowledge of architectural details, such as “lanceolate windows [and] the orientation of the axis” (143). Sensory description of the barn’s construction, such as the “dusky, filmed chestnut roof” (143), enliven the narrator’s own focus upon the immediate scene. At the same time, the narrator insists “the mind dwelt upon its past history” (143), evoking the shearing practices “which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time” (143) and conveying the dual perspective suggested in the phrase “the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers were in harmony with the barn” (144). In this context, the narrator’s view that “[f]or once Mediævalism and Modernism had a common standpoint” can be read as the outcome to Hardy’s
modifications to the conventional realist narrative.

The strength with which the novel represents a living rural history partially explained the view of Hardy as a pastoral novelist. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in particular, draws upon pastoral literature, a genre which offers a harmonious view of rural existence and the shepherd’s work, but was seen by conventional literary realism as idealistic. However, Hardy often uses pastoral incident in the novel to intensify his representation of character, principally through the depiction of Oak’s shepherding. Although the plot is broadly structured around the seasons of the shepherd’s calendar, for Hardy, “work...is not merely illustrative; it is seen as...a central kind of learning” (Williams 139). Indeed, it is through the frequent disruption of pastoral incident that Hardy conveys the development of character. Chapter V, entitled “A Pastoral Tragedy,” climaxes with Oak’s sheep spilling over the cliff. The event dramatizes the death of his romantic illusions about Bathsheba, with the symbolic dimension of the scene emphasized through the narrator’s doubling of the outcome, with “two hundred mangled carcasses representing in their condition just now at least two hundred more” (Hardy, *Crowd* 41). The event plays out Bathsheba’s earlier refusal of Oak’s marriage proposal, where the “direct practicality...of Bathsheba’s spoken thoughts...effectively destroy Gabriel’s vision of her” (Lucas 358). However, just as this pastoral event alters the course of Gabriel’s career, so too her refusal means that “as a result he [could] now deal with her at a practical level” (358), an outcome crucial to their relationship in the novel. Such
disruption might itself be read as dramatizing the tension between pastoral and realist conventions of representation within the novel.

Hardy’s use of Oak’s shepherding to convey character relations in Weatherbury is particularly suitable if we share Williams’ assertion that “the social forces within his fiction are deeply based in the rural economy itself” (137). This evocation of deeply rooted forces in turn echoes the perspective of Freudian critics, who read Oak’s sheep shearing in Chapter XXII as dramatizing the sexual tension between him and Bathsheba. Carpenter argues that contemporary censorship “resulted not in the abolition of sex but only in displacement” and that Hardy “must, if there is anything to Freud at all, have compensated for his inhibitions symbolically” (339). The description of Oak dragging the “frightened ewe to his shear-station, flinging it over upon its back...and [opening] up the neck and collar” (Hardy, Crowd 145) can be read as an enactment of his sexual desire for Bathsheba, emphasized by the initials B.E. being “newly stamped upon the shorn skin” (146). In turn, Bathsheba’s observation that “[s]he blushes at the insult” (145) foreshadows her own embarrassment—her becoming “red in the cheek...the blood wavering” (147), while suggesting an unconscious complicity in the response of the ewe that displays “a flush which was enviable...to any woman in the world” (145). Similarly, Oak’s snipping of the sheep’s groin after Boldwood’s arrival in the barn can be read as Oak “taking his jealous revenge symbolically and on a surrogate for...Bathsheba” (Carpenter 340), the
narrator claiming that “she had wounded the ewe’s shearer in a still more vital part” (Hardy, Crowd 147). Overall, Hardy modifies the pastoral convention of bucolic shepherd life to modify, in turn, conventional realist representation of character relations. What Williams criticizes as an “element of artifice...contrived picturesqueness” (134) in Hardy’s fiction seems instead a symptom of his subversive use of the pastoral genre.

Despite Hardy’s revisions to realist representation in the novel, his narrator retains a degree of omniscience. While this is used to represent the internal thoughts of the principal players (thoughts often unavailable to the empirical gaze of others), it relies upon a form of experience inaccessible to the wholly subjective perspective of individual characters. In contrast, Conrad’s anonymous narrator in Heart of Darkness addresses the reader in the first-person, whose narrative conveys a subjective point of view. This narrative, in turn, frames Marlow’s own narration of his journey into Africa. Presented in direct speech, this shows that neither perspective possesses the reliable omniscience of the third-person realist narrator. Yet despite this fragmented narrative, Edward Said argues that “the complicated and rich narrative form of Conrad’s great novella...[captures the] imperial attitude”, something he sees as “assum[ing]...the complete centrality of the West” (511). He states that “Kurtz’s great looting adventure, Marlow’s journey...and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery” (Said 512) and that, furthermore, “like narrative, imperialism has monopolized
the entire system of representation” which “allowed it to speak for Africans...Kurtz...Marlow and his audience” (514). Indeed, it is by considering Conrad’s subjective, conflicting narratives together as a single text that the novel conveys what Hampson calls “the discourse of imperialism” (504). Furthermore, Marlow’s assertion that “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze” (Conrad, *Darkness* 105) echoed Conrad’s own hope that by “blending...form and substance...the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words” (“Preface” 119), in turn mirroring the way that Marlow’s tale is enveloped, and clarified, by the frame narrative.

Conrad commences his thematic strategy by employing symbolist techniques to establish the subjectivity of each perspective. The novel opens with the narrator resting aboard The Nellie at dusk. Description of the Thames estuary is impressionistic; his sensory, imprecise adjectives such as “tranquil...diaphanous...imperceptible” (Conrad, *Darkness* 104) foreshadow the metaphysical landscapes of Marlow’s own narrative, while casual nautical vocabulary suggests the narrator’s familiarity with the setting, as he notes the captain “stood in the bows looking to seaward” (103). Indeed, his calm is conveyed through his harmonious description of the yawl, which “swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest” (103); the estuary, where “[t]he flood had made, the wind was nearly calm” (103); and the day itself, which ends “in a serenity
of...exquisite brilliance” (104). These combine to create a symbolic backdrop to the narrator’s naïve belief that the men on board “felt meditative...fit for nothing but placid staring” (104). Conveyed indirectly through figurative language, the resonance of such imagery intensifies the direct expression prevalent in authoritative realist narrative.

Juxtaposed images of darkness and light are used throughout Conrad’s novel. Although the precise symbolic significance of each tone remains ambiguous, the opening narrative frame suggests a connection between light and the narrator’s own uncritical view of British conquests abroad, those “messengers of the might within the land” (105). His view of “the sky...[as] a benign immensity of unstained light” evoke in him “the august light of abiding memories” (104). These evoke those lives affected by the Thames, from the “race that peopled its banks...[to] the men of whom the nation is proud...the great knights-errant of the sea” (104).

The narrator’s historical knowledge of conquest ships combine with his jingoistic view of “the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (103) to emphasize his disregard of the actions of those men who “had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword,” those “bearers of a spark from the sacred fire” synonymous with “the great spirit of the past” (104).

The scene here subtly undercuts the realist assumption that from knowledge of recorded history flows an empirical or enlightened knowledge of reality. Furthermore, Conrad makes clear that during these reflections “the sun sank low...as if about to go out...stricken to death” (104), foreshadowing the darkness of Marlow’s impending tale.
This encroachment by darkness upon light is expressed figuratively throughout the opening frame and indeed foreshadows what Robert Hampson sees as the ultimate purpose of Marlow’s narrative, namely that it “locates darkness at the heart of the ‘civilizing’ mission” (504). It also explains why at this point in the plot the narrator is unaware of the symbolic significance of “the brooding gloom” (Conrad, *Darkness* 103), an image foregrounded in the scene through assonance and repetition. Initially, the narrator records “a mournful gloom, brooding motionless” (103), but quickly “the gloom...brooding...[becomes] more somber every minute” (104). The narrator explains this through simile, with the gloom glowering “as if angered by the approach of the sun” (104), and unconsciously equates the “sun” with his “enlightened” reflections on imperialism. Similarly, his reflections cease as the sun disappears; and as “the dusk [falls] on the stream,” the narrator notes all the remaining sources of light, observing that “lights began to appear along the shore,” that the “lighthouse... shone strongly,” and that passing ships created “a great stir of lights” (105). However, this repetitive seeking of light dramatizes an unconscious clawing for defense against Marlow’s impending tale, whose declaration that “this also... has been one of the dark places of the earth” (105) introduces a conflicting first-person narrative. Formally, this interlacing of conflicting narratives and levels of perspective differs significantly from the stable omniscient narrative which dominates realist fiction.

*Heart of Darkness* combines symbolism with...
conventions drawn from gothic literature to emphasize both the strangeness and the unsettling familiarity of Marlow’s experience. Conrad’s use of disorienting setting, dreamlike imagery, and the mysterious patriarch can be read as an attempt to revise the empirical perspective of realism through what Robert Heilman sees as the potential of gothic representation, namely, the opening of “horizons beyond social patterns” (215) to become “the great liberator of feeling...in the depths of the human being” (215).

But while the novel combines gothic conventions with narrative techniques such as defamiliarization to suggest a metaphysical dimension to Marlow’s journey, Said stresses the social implications of such revision. He argues that Conrad’s gothic techniques create “dislocations in the narrator’s language,” something he sees as continually “drawing attention to how ideas and values are constructed” (Said 515). Part of the novel’s overall strategy, these dislocations demonstrate “[the] discrepancy between the orthodox and [Conrad’s] own views of empire” (515), a discrepancy rooted in the conflicting first-person narratives of the novel.

Said’s detected discrepancy is neatly illustrated by Marlow’s narrative as he tells his audience of “when the Romans first came here” (Conrad, *Darkness* 106). His lyrical tone is conveyed through his rhetorical appeal to his audience’s senses, asking them to “[i]magine...a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke,” which combines with unsettling references to time to convey sensory immediacy. This serves two purposes. Firstly, he tries to
unnerv[e]e his audience by asking them to envision the threat of an incoming invasion, to “imagine him here...a military camp lost in the wilderness” (106), thereby inverting the process of colonialism. Secondly, he attempts to defamiliarize their present surroundings by bringing the “darkness” to the Thames estuary. He conveys the perspective of the invading legionnaires, whose fate here is to “[l]and in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery” (106). Playing upon the image of colonized countries held by the champions of imperialism, he evokes “that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs...in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men” (106). Marlow’s earlier comment “you say ‘knights’” (106) is addressed to the narrator and confirms that the latter’s eulogy of British “knights-errant” (104) formed part of an audible speech presented to the reader as free-indirect discourse. This suggests that Marlow’s Roman tale is told in direct response to the narrator’s reflections and that, in turn, his African tale ultimately refutes the same unchallenged assumptions implicit in the narrator’s celebration of imperialism. The novel’s concluding narrative frame confirms that Marlow’s African tale has indeed defamiliarized their surroundings. The narrator’s earlier ambivalence at having to “hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (107) has now been replaced with an unsettled view of his surroundings. The Thames now “seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (187), echoing Marlow’s earlier recollection of his African journey into “the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (152).
A further device used by Conrad in Marlow’s narrative is an innovative technique that Ian Watts has called “delayed decoding” (qtd. in Said 515). The technique mirrors that of gothic narratives which, to create suspense in relaying a scene, withhold crucial information from the reader for as long as possible, and features in Marlow’s narrative as he describes “the remaining posts of that vanished fence” (Conrad, Darkness 164) outside Kurtz’s jungle house. His dramatic description of how one post “leaped up in the field of my glass” is followed by a digression as he asks, “You remember I told you” (164). He creates intrigue as he states that “[t]hese round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were...puzzling...disturbing,” only to digress once more onto “vultures...ants” (164). Only after a succession of subclauses does he reveal that “[t]hey would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house” (164). The gothic horror of Kurtz’s house is just one example of the unsettling incidents which Marlow relates. Yet despite his probable shock at such a sight, Marlow seems at odds to stress that “[he] was not so shocked as [one] may think,” claiming in a droll tone: “I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know” (164). Here and elsewhere in his tale, such understatement is combined with an attempt to root unsettling experiences in terms recognizable to his audience; for example, he uses the language of commerce when he reveals, “I am not disclosing any trade secrets...There was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there” (164). One interpretation of this tendency is that is creates the effect of the uncanny, “that
class of the frightening which leads us back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 340), in turn hinting that western imperialism is responsible for such horror. Furthermore, it reminds the reader that Marlow’s narrative tale is an oral-linguistic representation of his experience, enacted through both the literary technique discussed and the “self-consciously circular narrative forms [that] draw attention to themselves as artificial constructions” (Said 515). However, this is not to suggest that just because he “(according to the logic of realism) knows the end of the story he is about to tell” (Hampson 498), that Marlow is in complete control of his narrative. His early assertion that the experience was “not very clear” (Conrad, *Darkness* 107) finds expression throughout the tale in references to “unapproachable silence[s]” (163), “unspeakable secrets” (169), and a land “impenetrable to human thought” (162). Said suggests that, in addition to the imperialist strategy of the novel, *Heart of Darkness* is not “just a straightforward recital of Marlow’s adventures: it is also a dramatization of Marlow himself” (512). However, Terry Eagleton holds that, if the novel implies that “beneath imperialism lies the eternal barbarousness of the human condition... there seems little that can be done about the imperialist system” (243), a view that challenges the view that the novel invites the reader “to sense the potential of a [post-colonial] reality” (Said 515). Either way, these observations show how Conrad revises realist conventions to convey both the psychological complexity of character and a radical reinterpretation of imperialism.
Despite the revisions by both Hardy and Conrad to the conventions of literary realism, it would be inaccurate to see the path from early realism through to the *fin-de-siècle* and modernism as a linear progression of improving methods of representation. Instead, the modes suggest an engagement with the question of what constitutes reality itself, with literature developing a range of representational techniques. These ideas emerge in the novels, in particular through their modification of the realist convention of omniscient narrative. While Hardy’s novel from 1874 is read by Williams as encasing two distinct perspectives within a single third-person narrative: “customary and educated” (129), Conrad’s novel, published 25 years later in 1899, features multiple first-person narratives seen by Said to collectively express the “imperial attitude” (511). Similarly, each novel is distinct in its employment of non-realist genre conventions. While Hardy’s use of pastoral conventions and incident revises both realist representation and the original idealism of the pastoral genre, Conrad employs gothic techniques with an end similar to that of gothic literature itself. However, Conrad’s symbolism and impressionistic narratives radically diverged from realist representation, anticipating modernist depiction of character and setting.
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Cultural Reclamations in Helena Viramontes’
“The Moths”

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In the preface to the foundational collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherríe Moraga addressed the problem commonly faced by feminist women of color who struggle with oppression from sexism in the civil rights movement and from racism in the feminist movement (xviii). These tensions were made clear in the very foundations of the Mexican-American civil rights movement. The *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, which declared the purpose of the Chicano movement, presented a vision of idealized, united brotherhood, but failed to address the concerns of Chicana women (Pratt 861). The exclusion of
women’s issues was not due to mere negligence; concerns about gender issues were so marginalized that those Mexican-American women who identified as feminists were often referred to as traitors (Pratt 862). Allegations of selling out to the dominant culture from the men within the Chicano movement and the threat of assimilation from the white feminist movement forced Chicana writers to draw on cultural traditions in order to create space for themselves as women of color who fell outside of traditional gender roles and expectations.

Chicana authors use cultural traditions to show that it is not necessary to choose between being a Chicana or being a feminist while simultaneously criticizing the patriarchal aspects of their culture. In this regard, the re-articulations of traditional tropes present in *The Moths and Other Stories* by Helena Viramontes have garnered particular critical attention. Ana María Carbonell, for example, explores the role of the traditional La Llorona myth in Viramontes’ story “The Cariboo Café” while JoAnn Pavletich and Margot Gayle Backus analyze Viramontes’ re-articulation of the corrido narrative, a traditional form of ballad in “which the traditional male corrido hero’s defiance remains securely anchored to masculine authority” (130-31), in the story “Neighbors.” Unfortunately, the volume’s title story “The Moths” has been largely overlooked by critics. In “The Moths,” Viramontes roots her criticisms and her solutions in Chicano culture. Specifically, she uses an inverted tale of La Llorona to criticize the traditional family hierarchy and offers the curandera tradition with its spiritual,
medical, and community implications as an alternative role for women, thus proving that it is possible to criticize and reject sexist aspects of Mexican-American culture while still maintaining a Chicana identity.

Viramontes centers her criticism around the patriarchal structure of the family in Mexican-American culture as a way to expose the fallible nature of traditional gender roles. A main concern of the Chicano movement in the 1970s and 1980s was the preservation of the traditional family structure. In this model, the role of protecting Mexican-American culture fell to a strong, central father figure (Morrow 67). In “The Moths,” the father of the family typifies the domineering father figure idealized by the Chicano movement. The scene in which the father attempts to force the narrator to attend Mass is a striking example of the way in which the patriarchal attempt to forcefully uphold cultural norms can be expressed through manipulation. The father “strategically directed his anger at Amá for her lousy ways of bringing up daughters, being disrespectful and unbelieving” (Viramontes 169). In this scene, the father upholds the cultural tradition of the Catholic Church by attempting to force the narrator to attend Mass. He also casts doubt on Amá’s abilities as a mother. The father’s manipulation exemplifies the patriarchal nature of the family structure in two ways. First, it relies on the notion of a male-only protector of culture who will resort to manipulating his own family in order to forcefully uphold cultural mores. Second, by accusing Amá of being a bad mother, the father places her in the category of destructive
motherhood, thus calling up the traditional good mother/bad mother dichotomy which exists in Chicano folklore and religious beliefs. By presenting a father figure who is in line with traditional ideas family and gender roles, Viramontes reveals the manipulation implicit in a structure which relies on a forceful protector of cultural knowledge.

When the father in “The Moths” accuses Amá of raising her daughters as being disrespectful, he implicitly identifies her as a mother who threatens Chicano culture due to her supposed failure to raise her daughters in a way that conforms to traditional Catholic standards of behavior. Traditional tropes of motherhood in Mexican-American culture center around the dichotomy between the Virgin Mary, the passive and selfless mother, and dangerous and destructive mother figures such as La Malinche, the woman who selfishly betrayed her people to the Spanish conquerors, and La Llorona, a sort of ghostly figure who drowns her children and is doomed to wander the earth weeping for them (Carbonell 56). The father’s censure of Amá is an attempt to force her to remain in the idealized passive role of motherhood represented by the Virgin. Although Amá is accused of departing from the path of the good mother, Viramontes depicts Amá as a passive mother throughout “The Moths.” When her husband accuses her of being a terrible mother, Amá does not reply. Instead, the other daughters bully their younger sister into going to Mass as a way of protecting their mother. Later, when the narrator returns from buying soup for her grandmother, Amá is found sobbing in the kitchen, not by her mother’s bedside. That
Amá weeps while her daughter puts away the soup she has bought for her grandmother indicates that the burden of caring for Abuelita has fallen entirely to the narrator. Amá takes no active role in caring for her own mother; instead, she passively relies on her daughter for comfort, barely ceasing her cries to ask “¿Y mi Amá?” (Viramontes 170). Amá’s helpless weeping indicates her own powerlessness as a mother to aid her daughter. By painting a portrait of Amá as a mother who embodies the ideal of passive motherhood, Viramontes points out the problematic nature of this supposed ideal. In her passivity, Amá has been rendered helpless to protect her own child and must instead turn to her daughters for comfort and protection from her own husband and in the face of her mother’s death.

Viramontes contrasts the protagonist and her sisters: the narrator does not protect her mother from the truth of Abuelita’s illness, rather the narrator challenges Amá’s passivity by attempting to provoke her. Frustrated with her mother’s weeping, the narrator informs Amá that Abuelita has repeatedly fallen out of bed. Passing on this information does nothing to protect Amá and only makes her cry harder. However, it does indicate the narrator’s refusal to merely accept her mother’s passivity. Instead, the narrator erupts with anger at her mother, explaining her attempts to upset Amá as a result of being “angry and just so tired of the quarrels and beatings” (Viramontes 170). Viramontes uses this scene to draw a stark contrast between the narrator and her mother. As the daughter lashes out in anger, a built-up response to numerous quarrels, her mother responds by
looking “confused, angry…filled with sorrow” (Viramontes 170). However, she gives her daughter no reply. In her anger, the daughter actively lashes out while Amá retains her role as the passive mother figure.

Viramontes constructs the division of passive versus active between Amá and the narrator to criticize the ideal of docile motherhood. Amá and her daughter, the narrator, each embody one half of the passive Virgin/aggressive Llorona split. If the ideal mother is the passive Virgin Mary, the destructive La Llorona, a legendary woman who is said to have drowned her children, is her antithesis. While Amá is an expression of the passivity of the ideal mother, the Virgin Mary, the narrator is a more complicated embodiment of La Llorona. While tales of La Llorona traditionally operate to uphold gender roles by painting women who act outside of the role of traditional motherhood as miserable and destructive, Chicana writers such as Viramontes have rewritten Llorona tales to depict such women as subversive figures (Carbonell 56-57). For example, Ana Maria Carbonell views the washer woman in another Viramontes’ story “The Cariboo Café” as a re-articulation of La Llorona as a figure of maternal resistance. For Carbonell, the major indicators that Viramontes gives to signal the washer woman’s role as La Llorona are the washer woman’s constant cries for her lost child (Carbonell 59) and her connection to water. Carbonell examines two appearances of water in “The Cariboo Café.” In the first, Carbonell claims that Viramontes presents water as a destructive force because it distracts the washer woman from her attention to her son:
“when he wanted to play, my feet were in pools of water” (60). Later, water is referred to again as the washer woman dies and is “blinded by liquid darkness.” In this instance, Carbonell suggests that the washer woman “finds union with her son in the afterlife” and so “water becomes the medium through which she can actively transform her dismembered self into a unified maternal figure” (64). In moving the washer woman from loss to reconnection with her son, Carbonell argues that Viramontes rewrites La Llorona as a woman who resists separation from her children and thus embodies active maternal resistance (71).

Similarly, in “The Moths,” Viramontes associates the narrator with La Llorona through images of water. The most significant appearance of water in “The Moths” occurs at the end of the story, as the narrator bathes Abuelita’s body. Water is connected to religion when the narrator fills a basin with water and then drapes towels over her shoulders “with the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments” (Viramontes 171). In this context, water becomes holy and connects the narrator to organized religion, echoing the influence of the Catholic Church. In the final moments of the story, the narrator is most closely connected to the story of La Llorona. Filling the bathtub with water, the narrator enters the water, not to destroy her grandmother’s life but to care for her now that she is dead. As the narrator weeps for her mother and grandmother in a bathtub overflowing with water, her role as a Llorona figure becomes clear. The final reference to water furthers the narrator’s association with La Llorona by connecting water to motherhood as the narrator
in her loneliness wishes she could “return to the waters of the womb...so that we would never be alone again” (Viramontes 171). Through these references, Viramontes flips the traditional tale of La Llorona on its head – instead of a mother weeping near water for a child she has drowned, Viramontes presents readers with the story of a child weeping for the loss of her mother and grandmother. The inversion of the tale of La Llorona functions as a criticism of the way patriarchal notions of gender and motherhood affect the relationships between mother and daughter.

As the narrator weeps in the bathtub, she is mourning two losses: the death of Abuelita and the separation from her mother. The nature of this dual loss further highlights Viramontes’ criticism of sexist gender roles. After the loss of her grandmother, who has been her teacher and protector, the natural place for the daughter to turn is to her mother. However, as described above, the notion of ideal motherhood as passive acceptance of the father as the head of the household has removed the narrator’s mother from the role of protector of her daughter. The only way Amá has been able to protect her daughter is by sending her to Abuelita’s house. With Abuelita dead, the narrator has lost her place of safety. Viramontes’ inverted tale of La Llorona indicts the damaging nature of oppressive gender roles. The notion of men as the rulers of the household does not guarantee safety, according to this criticism; rather it damages families by isolating mothers from daughters. By presenting Amá as the embodiment of the passive Virgin Mary and her daughter as a resistant
Llorona character who weeps for her loss of safety and the separation from her mother, Viramontes shows that the traditional, idealized view of mothers as passive figures actually does damage to daughters by robbing them of a place of protection.

Although Viramontes criticizes the sexist expectations of Chicana mothers which prevent them from protecting their daughters, she does not reject the entire Mexican-American culture. While the narrator does not fall into the ideal of Chicana womanhood upheld by her father as the proper form of femininity, she does not divorce herself from her culture. Instead, she turns away from the patriarchal gender role offered by her father and looks to another family member for guidance. The narrator, sent to her grandmother’s house by her mother to escape more punishment for her violation of gender norms, finds tasks suitable for her “bull hands,” which though incapable of performing “the fineries of embroidery,” are perfectly deft at helping Abuelita in the garden or caring for her grandmother when she becomes ill (Viramontes 168-169). In her own home, the narrator indicates her own discomfort, saying, “I wasn’t even pretty or nice like my sisters and I just couldn’t do the girl things they could do” (Viramontes 168). The narrator’s inability to do “girl things” signals her reluctance to take on the traditional roles embodied by her mother and sisters and promoted by her father and the Catholic Church. Instead, working alongside Abuelita, the narrator finds a place of belonging where she feels “safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel”
At Abuelita’s house, the narrator finds tasks which offer her a different way of being a woman that do not require her to passively conform to traditional gender roles and instead offer her a place as a future protector of her culture. At Abuelita’s house, the narrator plants flowers and herbs and grinds chiles. Abuelita’s vast knowledge of plants coupled with her ability to heal using that knowledge connects her to the curandera tradition, an important part of Chicano culture. Curanderas practice and thus preserve a specific form of cultural knowledge which is a hybrid of Spanish and indigenous traditions (Morrow 68). As a curandera who passes her knowledge to her granddaughter, Abuelita is a protector of Chicano culture who stands in contrast to the narrator’s father. While the father strives to protect his culture by forcing his daughter to go to church, the grandmother engages in cultural preservation in a more egalitarian way by passing on her knowledge. By juxtaposing these two figures, Viramontes demonstrates that cultural traditions can be preserved without domination and establishes space for women as cultural protectors. She also offers an alternative cultural tradition in which women can reject traditional gender roles and patriarchal domination without erasing their cultural background. Viramontes’ articulation of the curandera tradition in “The Moths” illustrates one way women can take on the role of cultural protectors while her inclusion of the Llorona narrative illustrates why women need the opportunity to step outside of the sexist ideal of female passivity.
The brief narrative of “The Moths” by Helena Viramontes accomplishes a great deal. Viramontes criticizes the notion of the family championed by the Chicano movement which featured fathers as the protectors of culture and mothers as ideally passive. In presenting the narrator as a daughter weeping for the loss of her mother and grandmother, Viramontes parts ways with traditional tales of La Llorona to illustrate the way ideal notions of passive mothers harm families because they create divisions between mothers and daughters. In exposing the way traditional notions of “good” motherhood rely on passive compliance, Viramontes indicates that there is a need for an alternative form of Chicana womanhood. Yet Viramontes does not wholly abandon her cultural background. Instead, she shows that though there are patriarchal facets of Chicano culture, women can use non-sexist aspects of Mexican-American traditions to form alternative gender roles. In offering readers the curandera tradition, which provides a way for women to take on the role of active cultural protector and teacher, Viramontes breaks away from the notion that culture must be protected through the enforcement of sexist family structures and presents a method for handing down traditions in a more egalitarian fashion. Helena Viramontes puts a new twist on the Llorona story in “The Moths” and, in so doing, joins with other Chicana feminist writers who illustrate that it is not necessary to accept sexism in order to maintain a Chicana identity and resist assimilation into dominant white culture.
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Timeless Feminist Resistance Defying Dominant Discourses in Sor Juana’s “Hombres necios” And Margaret Atwood’s “A Women’s Issue”

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At first glance, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Margaret Atwood may appear to share only one commonality: their gender. Separated by more than three centuries of literary tradition and situated at polar ends of the North American continent, these two women could not have lived in more contrasting eras and environments. While one can unearth distinct differences in the tone, emphasis, and approach of each writer, an examination of the issues dealt with in their poetry can provide an essential connection: both
poets exhibit feminist resistance to the dominant discourses of their day.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (c. 1648-1694), often hailed as the “Tenth Muse of Mexico”\(^1\) and the “First Feminist in the New World,”\(^2\) was a remarkable woman. Best known for the ways in which she transcended the strict gender boundaries of seventeenth-century Mexico, Sor Juana accomplished a stunning number of firsts for women in the New World during her short yet fascinating life. An intense lover of learning and in constant pursuit of knowledge, Sor Juana is known to have amassed a library of at least four thousand books, the largest in Mexico at the time (Reese 54). A frequent participant in intellectual and social debates, Sor Juana authored several works, the most famous being her “La Repuesta a Sor Filotea” (“Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filotea de la Cruz”),\(^3\) which boldly defended a woman’s right to education. While Sor Juana has been praised as the finest Latin American poet of the Baroque period, she has also been called “one of the most carnal bards of all time: bawdy, tactile, fiery, elegiac, [hitting] multiple notes, always insisting on the importance of desire” (Manrique 11).

In order to appreciate, let alone begin any sort of meaningful discussion of Sor Juana and her poetry, it is imperative first to understand the social conditions in Mexico during her lifetime and in turn the dominant discourses against and with which she composed her poetry. According to Dorothy Schons, author of the landmark article, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz,”
moral conditions were extremely lax in seventeenth-century Mexico, creating a dangerous world for women, as the “male element of the population was under no restraint (even the priesthood was no exception) and roamed at will, preying on society. Not only immorality, but depravity [...] reigned” (41). In order to illustrate the severity of the conditions, Schons cites an entry in a seventeenth-century chronicle that notes the death of a cleric, praising the fact that he had actually remained a virgin throughout his life. Still, society and the church viewed women as the root of temptation and therefore the cause of the aforementioned evil. In her discussion of Mexico’s moral conditions, Schons notes the attitudes of two important ecclesiastics of Sor Juana’s time, Francisco de Aguiar y Seixas, Archbishop of Mexico from 1682 to 1698, and Antonio Núñez, Sor Juana’s confessor. Both men believed that in order to preserve their chastity they had to avoid the temptation of women at all costs. For Seixas, guarding himself from evil meant not looking a woman in the face and even thanking God for his nearsightedness. For, Núñez even the touch of a woman could mean compromising his virtue so he always covered his hands with his mantle. As Schons’ research makes evident, the prevailing cultural script of 17th century Mexico was one in which a woman was cast in the traditional Western role of femme fatale.

Into this atmosphere of medieval attitudes concerning women, Sor Juana was born, the illegitimate child of a Spanish-born father and a criolla mother (Paz 65). An extremely inquisitive child, Sor Juana learned to read
at the age of three after following her older sister to school. Once she acquired this ability, nothing could stop her—Sor Juana’s thirst for knowledge drove her to study anything that was available, including the Latin and Aztec languages, mathematics, logic, history, and classical literature (Reese 54). When Sor Juana was between the ages of eight and ten, she was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Mexico City, where she continued to accumulate knowledge and skill (Paz 86).

In 1664, at the age of fifteen, Sor Juana was introduced to the newly arrived Vicereine, Doña Leonor Carreto, Marquise de Mancera. Immediately impressed, Leonor enlisted Sor Juana as one of her ladies-in-waiting (Paz 88). It was during this time in her life that Sor Juana first employed her literary talents as a method to honor her royal friends. Some of Sor Juana’s most famous and most commonly translated poems are dedicated to Leonor, who is referred to as Laura in the text: “Divine Laura, My Life Was Always Yours,” and “Elegy,” which consists of three parts—“Drunk with Laura’s Beauty,” “Laura Split in Two Beautiful Halves,” and “Laura, Desire Dies with You.” In fact, according to Paz, “more than half of [Sor Juana’s] literary output consists of poems for ceremonial occasions: homages, epistles, congratulations, poems to commemorate the death of an Archbishop or the birth of a magnate” (186).

After five years of court life, Sor Juana entered the convent of San Jerónimo in 1669, at the age of twenty. While she no longer resided at the Viceregal court, Sor Juana continued to develop close relationships with New
Spain’s royalty, as well as writing for and about them. In particular, Sor Juana became especially intimate with María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, Countess de Paredes de Nava, wife of Don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda, the Marquis de la Laguna, the Viceroy of Mexico from 1680 to 1686. According to Paz, the Countess became the “emotional center” of Sor Juana’s life for several years, inspiring countless poems, including “When a Slave Gives Birth” and the famous “My Divine Lysi”7 (Paz 195).

So far we have discussed Sor Juana’s poetry only in light of courtly adulation, but her poetic works go far beyond royal dedication to include stunning social commentary on the dominant discourse of 17th century Mexico. These poems become all the more astonishing when placed in the context of the literature produced during her time, “a literature for the few, erudite, academic, profoundly religious (in a dogmatic rather than a creative sense), hermetic, and aristocratic, […] written by men to be read by men” (Paz 45). The dominant discourse of the Spanish and Mexican cultural scene was controlled by men like Lope de Vega, Góngora, Quevedo, and Calderón, yet Sor Juana was able to engage in this rigid, hierarchal system, even publishing her poetry in Spain. This was possible, according to Stephanie Merrim, editor of the groundbreaking collection, Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and author of “Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism,” because of Sor Juana’s patronage and acceptance by the court, which allowed for “the considerable autonomy.
from conventual strictures so essential to her intellectual endeavors. In philosophical terms it might be said that, for Sor Juana, to accede to knowledge involved alloying herself with the reigning (masculine) tradition” (22). In addition, Merrim notes Sor Juana’s belief in an androgynous soul and her previously mentioned defense of a woman’s right to education. Putting all of these pieces together, Merrim declares that “rather than asserting or projecting women’s ‘difference,’ both ideologically and literarily Sor Juana sought to negate their difference, to introject or appropriate the masculine realm for the feminine and to place them on the same continuum” (23). This is an essential argument to keep in mind when examining Sor Juana’s poetry, especially in light of New Spain’s prevailing cultural script, which excluded and stigmatized women.

In addition to a brief examination of the dominant discourse, we must also explore Sor Juana’s role as a feminist writer and her works in relation to other feminist writings. According to Merrim, this is where the greatest challenge lies—“situating Sor Juana’s work within the traditions of women’s writing, both universal and within her own milieu” (25). This is necessary, Merrim maintains, because evolving feminist criticism demands “substantive comparative studies” of women writers (26). In order to remedy this gap in Sor Juana criticism and to arrive at a working understanding of Sor Juana’s work on its own terms, Merrim suggests that Sor Juana be studied in light of women writers, including her predecessors, her contemporaries, and her descendents. By viewing Sor
Juana’s writings in light of Margaret Atwood’s work, and *vice versa*, it becomes possible to further situate both writers in the women’s literary tradition. An analysis of the issues addressed in Sor Juana’s famous poem “Hombres necios” (Foolish Men) in comparison to those dealt with in Margaret Atwood’s “A Women’s Issue” will illustrate similarities, like the treatment of timeless feminist issues and tactics used to resist each writer’s respective dominant discourse, while also highlighting important differences in each writer’s tone, placement of emphasis, and approach.

Sor Juana’s celebrated redonilla, “Hombres necios” (Foolish Men), which contains seventeen octosyllabic quatrains, is a stunning logical argument that resists seventeenth-century Mexico’s prevailing discourse of an exclusively male academic world, as well as the permeating ideology that women are inherently evil. In order to “argue for the female as a bastion of reason,” Merrim writes that Sor Juana “‘cannibalizes’ the topic of love, using it as a pretext for philosophical debates and as a showcase for her own lucid reasoning” (25). In the opening lines of her poem, Sor Juana writes:

Misguided men, who will chastise
a woman when no blame is due,
oblivious that it is you
who prompted what you criticize. (149)

This outright accusation reverses the male’s chastisement of the feminine sex, pointing out that men wrongly fault women for problems they create themselves, not the other way around. By portraying men as illogical and hypocritical,
Sor Juana challenges her readers to rethink the dominant discourse of an all-male academic world. Three quatrains later, Sor Juana addresses this issue again:

> Your daring must be qualified,
> your sense is no less senseless than
> the child who calls the boogeyman,
> then weeps when he is terrified. (149)

In these lines, Sor Juana emphasizes men’s irrational reasoning and behavior, in addition to “[chiding them] for usurping the bodies and minds of women and [laughing] at them for immaturely creating a monster [. . .] and scaring themselves” (Arenal 128). Here, the poem works to resist seventeenth-century Mexico’s prevailing script because Sor Juana reduces the man, along with his masculinity and supposed superior reasoning skills, to a frightened and uneducated child.

Two quatrains later, Sor Juana reiterates her resistance to the idea that women are less rational than men, writing, “If knowingly one clouds a mirror/ [. . .] can he lament that it’s not clearer?” (149). In her signature fashion, Sor Juana employs a brilliant metaphor phrased as a question, forcing her reader to consider the ideological belief that men possess superior intellectual and reasoning skills. These lines, as well as those discussed above, clearly express Sor Juana’s desire to negate gender differences in order to place men and women on the same continuum.

> “Hombres necios” also challenges the concept of the femme fatale. To do this, Sor Juana explores the male’s double standard and the virgin/whore dichotomy, transferring
blame from women to men and reversing the Christian “Fall from Grace.” In the ninth quatrain of her poem, Sor Juana writes,

    You men are such a foolish breed,  
    appraising with a faulty rule,  
    the first you charge with being cruel,  
    the second, easy, you decree. (151)

These lines, exposing the irrationality of male desire, boldly indict all men alike. Sor Juana’s assessment recognizes the ability of a man to harm a woman’s reputation and disgrace her honor, as well as his willingness to quickly cast blame upon women. In like manner, Sor Juana’s next quatrain implicitly stresses the hypocrisy of the virgin/whore dichotomy, “if not willing, she offends,/ but willing, she infuriates.” (151). These lines emphasize the existence and acceptance of double standards in seventeenth-century Mexico. In addition, Sor Juana’s poignant statement illustrates how disadvantageous these duplicities are to women.

In the fourteenth quatrain of “Hombres necios,” Sor Juana addresses the timeless issue of prostitution:

    Whose is the greater guilt therein  
    when either’s conduct may dismay:  
    she who sins and takes the pay,  
    or he who pays her for the sin? (151)

By phrasing these lines as a question, Sor Juana demands that her reader reassess existing beliefs about the assignment of guilt and shame in the society of seventeenth-century Mexico. Although she does not condone prostitution, Sor
Juana makes it clear that she desires for men and women to be judged equally.

Sor Juana’s most severe charge against men appears in the closing lines of her poem:

But no, I deem you still will revel in your arms and arrogance, and in promise and persistence adjoin flesh and world and devil. (151)

In her efforts to reverse the dominant discourse which empowers men, yet victimizes women, Sor Juana strongly associates the male sex with worldly desires. Rather than phrasing these lines as a question, Sor Juana forms them into a bold statement that confirms her feminist stance, as well as emphasizes her religious beliefs. In order to reverse the Christian “Fall from Grace,” Sor Juana links men with the devil, transposing thousands of years of stigmatized guilt and shame from women to men.

The overall tone of “Hombres necios” is satirical, yet stunningly poignant. Although the poem is written in a very structured manner, its accusations transcend discourse, form, and translation. Words like “blame,” “rule,” “guilt,” and “sin” appear in the poem, creating a tone that implicates men for taking advantage of women while evading the intense stigma of their desires.

In this poem, Sor Juana’s emphasis is placed on male irrationality as well as a man’s power to harm a woman by disgracing her honor and reputation. In this indictment, Sor Juana blames men as the cause of their own problems, as well as women’s. By emphasizing the virgin/whore
dichotomy and the “Fall from Grace,” the poem portrays the double standards of men, which often leave women in unwinnable situations.

Two-hundred and forty-five years after Sor Juana’s death, Margaret Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada on November 18, 1939. As a writer of enormous range, Atwood has composed prize-winning works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. With her writing spanning over four decades, she is an unquestionably accomplished author whose texts tend to emphasize universal as well as personal matters.

“A Women’s Issue,” appearing as part of the sequence “Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written” in Atwood’s poetry collection *True Stories*, clearly illustrates Atwood’s concern with feminist issues. Printed in 1981, this poem accurately reflects the social conditions surrounding Atwood at the time of publication. According to Shirley Neuman, author of “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale,*” the atmosphere between the years of 1965 and 1985 signified considerable progress for women’s rights, including improvements in “access to higher education and the professions, in employment equity, in access to legal abortion, and in divorce law,” yet by 1984, the women’s movement had come under attack in the United States (858). To illustrate this point, Neuman cites some stunning statistics from the years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency (1981-1989):

[W]omen made up an increasing percentage of those in the lowest-paid occupations [...], the number of elected and politically
appointed women declined, [and] one-third of all federal budget cuts under Reagan’s presidency came from programs that served mainly women, even though these programs represented only 10 per cent of the federal budget. [...] Murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence increased by 160 per cent [...], the federal government defeated bills to fund shelters for battered women, stalled already approved funding, and in 1981 closed down the Office of Domestic Violence it had opened only two years earlier. (859-860)

Abortion rights also came under attack—some states not only made it illegal but also passed laws restricting the dissemination of information about it; clinics were bombed, and Medicaid stopped funding the procedure (Neuman 860). Just as this freedom of choice was being eliminated, many women coming of age in North America began to resist the ideals of feminism. As Neuman explains, young women “in the confidence born of their mothers’ success, in the desire for self-differentiation that ever characterizes the young, overly credulous of the media and perhaps anxious to find a man, asserted that they didn’t need feminism” (861).

As is obvious, the dominant discourse surrounding Atwood is in stark contrast to that of Sor Juana’s. Emerging during a period of dramatic improvement in women’s rights, the cultural script of North America in the 1980s no longer excluded women from its literary world but instead
eagerly welcomed their works. Nevertheless, the prevailing discourse was also influenced by a regression or “backlash” against the women’s movement, increasing violence towards women, and general public apathy.

Writing within a discourse heavily influenced by feminism, Atwood has often rejected the ‘feminist’ label as applied to her writing. In a 1985 interview with feminist theorist Elizabeth Meese, the poet defined the kind of feminist she was and was not. Although she firmly expressed her belief in “‘the rights of women...[as] equal human beings,’” Atwood rejected “feminist or doctrinaire separatism,” stating, “‘if practical, hardline, anti-male feminists took over and became the government, I would resist them’” (Neuman 858).

We should not assume that Atwood’s resistance of the label ‘feminist’ means that feminism has not influenced her work. In reality, quite the opposite is true. In 1984, Alicia Ostriker wrote of contemporary women’s poetry, including Atwood’s, “the overwhelming sensation to be gotten [...] is the smell of camouflage burning, the crackle of anger, free at last, the whirl and rush of flamelike rage that has so often swept the soul, and as often been damped down, so that we never thought there could be words for it” (485). This description, summarizing the momentous freedom felt by many in the women’s movement, places Atwood’s poetry, particularly her 1971 collection *Power Politics*, in the realm of feminist writing. In describing the poems found in Atwood’s collection, Ostriker notes that “sex is violence; love is a banal addiction involving the surrender of self to
sentimental stereotype” (487). As we will see, Ostriker’s observation proves to apply to “A Women’s Issue,” which literally dissects issues that women have been dealing with for hundreds of years.

In dissecting timeless topics of concern for women, “A Women’s Issue” provides a shocking analysis that resists the dominant discourse of 1980s North America. To do this, Atwood employs the metaphorical theme of a museum throughout the poem, introducing various women as “Exhibit A,” “Exhibit B,” and “Exhibit C” (68). Her extended metaphor challenges the prevailing cultural script by forcing readers to deal with shocking images of oppressed women. The first two stanzas of the poem wryly present a woman in a chastity belt or a “spiked device/ that locks around the waist and between/ the legs, with holes in it like a tea strainer” and a woman “in black with a net window/ to see through and a four-inch/ wooden peg jammed up/ between her legs so she can’t be raped” (68). Atwood’s alarming descriptions boldly acknowledge the ways in which sexuality is used to repress women, just as those of Sor Juana did.

The third stanza of Atwood’s poem introduces the reader to a young girl who is “dragged into the bush by the midwives/ and made to sing while they scrape the flesh/ from between her legs, [...]” (68). These lines imply a strong lack of choice. By involving women in the act of mutilation, Atwood makes them complicit in the oppression. Accordingly, blame is placed upon the culture, rather than one gender or the other. Atwood furthers this accusation with her next lines:
Now she can be married.
For each childbirth they’ll cut her
open, then sew her up.
Men like tight women.
The ones that die are carefully buried. (68)

Here both men and women function as part of a culture
that represses women because of their sexuality. As
Atwood makes clear, women are required to surrender their
happiness, pleasure, and perhaps even their lives to satisfy
men. There is no room for “love” in Atwood’s depiction of
misogynist culture.

Atwood’s fourth stanza, like Sor Juana’s fourteenth
quatrain, addresses the issue of prostitution. Atwood writes,
“The next exhibit lies flat on her back/ while eighty men
a night/ move through her, ten an hour” (68). This blunt
description foregoes the discussion of choice—there is none.
In stark contrast to Sor Juana’s quatrain, which implies a
mutual guilt, Atwood’s lines make it clear that this woman is
oppressed. The stanza continues,

She looks at the ceiling, listens
to the door open and close.
A bell keeps ringing.
Nobody knows how she got here. (68)

In these lines, Atwood resists the dominant discourse by
illustrating the danger of cultural apathy. By compelling
her reader to question existing beliefs and behaviors,
Atwood challenges willed ignorance. In addition, Atwood’s
description encourages her reader to bear witness to the
oppression of women in order to put an end to it.
The fifth stanza of “A Women’s Issue” begins by summarizing the previous descriptions and asking a question: “You’ll notice that what they have in common/ is between the legs. Is this/ why wars are fought?” (69). These lines, which further depict sexuality as the cause of women’s oppression, encourage questioning of the cultural motives for repressing women. Atwood continues her stanza by making the bodies of women the bloody battleground where these wars are fought:

   Enemy territory, no man’s
   land, to be entered furtively,
   fenced, owned but never surely,
   scene of these desperate forays
   at midnight, captures
   and sticky murders, doctors’ rubber gloves
   greasy with blood, flesh made inert, the
   surge of your own uneasy power. (69)

In demonstrating how injurious and at times deadly women’s oppression can be, Atwood illustrates the extreme differences of power found in the dominant discourse. In addition, her disturbing images force readers to confront cultural apathy and the “backlash” against the women’s movement that resulted in budget cuts that affected a women’s choice to leave an abusive husband or get an abortion.

In the last two lines of “A Women’s Issue,” Atwood recalls the museum metaphor but completely turns it around: “This is no museum. Who invented the word love?” (69). By reversing her metaphor, Atwood makes it clear that her descriptions are not of a far-off land in a time long ago, but
of right here and right now. In addition, her question implies that the fairy-tale notion of love cannot exist along with women’s oppression.

The overall tone of Atwood’s poem is one that recalls the “personal is political” message of the 1970s in which women came to understand enduring personal issues as political problems that resulted from systematic oppression. Accordingly, “A Women’s Issue” urgently demands that readers bear witness in order to avoid willed ignorance and to achieve social empowerment and justice. To do this, the tone is not only urgent but also physical and violent. Words like “flesh,” “blood,” “wars,” “murders,” “jammed,” “raped,” “dragged,” “scrape,” “scabs,” “cut,” and “buried” appear, creating shocking and disturbing imagery that implies the danger of cultural apathy.

In her poem, Atwood places emphasis on the extreme differences of power between men and women and how these differences contribute to a man’s power to inflict emotional and physical harm to a woman. Throughout her poem, Atwood also emphasizes the females’ lack of choice in each “exhibit.” None of the women she describes has chosen to be part of this dark display, yet feminist “backlash” and cultural apathy have allowed for the systematic oppression that results in Atwood’s violent descriptions.

After closely examining each poem, it is apparent that there are clear differences in tone and emphasis which result in contrasting approaches to three specific issues: placement of blame, the ways in which men can harm women, and prostitution. In “Hombres necios,” Sor Juana
places the blame and guilt for women’s oppression solely on men. In contrast, “A Women’s Issue” faults the culture as a whole. When considering a man’s ability to harm a woman, Sor Juana views the mind and soul as what is damaged, while for Atwood the harm is done to the woman’s body. Lastly, both poets address prostitution with the intent that readers question the dominant discourse, yet they approach the issue very differently. Sor Juana, as a nun writing in seventeenth-century Mexico, did not and possibly could not fully sympathize with the woman in that situation. Atwood’s position greatly differs in that she portrays the woman as a victim of man and culture.

Despite these differences, comparing Sor Juana and Atwood serves to illustrate a common trait—both writers use poetry to challenge their respective dominant discourses. To do this, both poets address issues that deeply affect women. In their treatment of these subjects, they demand that their readers question existing beliefs and accepted behaviors in order to reverse cultural scripts that oppress women. By making this connection, both Sor Juana and Atwood can be more firmly placed in the feminist tradition of women’s writing.
Notes

1 See Ludwig Pfandl, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: La décima musa de México, ed. Francisco de la Maza (Mexico: UNAM, 1963); Paz 275 (Part V: The Tenth Muse); Enrique Alberto Arias, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Music: Mexico’s ‘Tenth Muse,’” Musical Voices of Early Modern Women: Many-Headed Melodies, ed. Thomasin LaMay (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 311.


3 See Margaret Sayers Peden’s translation in Poems, Protest, and a Dream: Selected Writings, 2-75.

4 For the chronicle entry, see Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 41.

5 For further information on the attitudes of Seixas and Núñez, including excerpts from their biographies, see Schons 41-42.


7 See Sor Juana, Sor Juana’s Love Poems, 12-15 and 16-21.
8 See Margaret Sayers Peden’s translation in *Poems, Protest, and a Dream: Selected Writings*, 148-151.
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Schons, Dorothy. “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.” Merrim 38-60. Print.


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