

## HANGING OUT THE LAUNDRY: HEROINES IN THE MIDST OF DIRT AND CLEANLINESS

**Aritha van Herk**  
*University of Calgary*

The tremendous valorization of women's experience by feminist criticism produced a tsunami in the previously androcentric field of canon formation. The careful re-visitation and re-visioning of women's experience as represented in literature challenged not only the elevation of male experience and expression but also the accepted values of a patriarchal hegemony. The appropriate critiquing of phallogocentric ideology, the fascinating debates about the effect of sexual dichotomies, and the analysis of *écriture féminine* served to revise the accepted canon in terms of women's presence as both subjects and creators. But in the exhilarating rush to get women out of both madhouse and attic, footnote and funhouse, another more elusive slippage occurred. In attacking and revising the established canon, feminist theory and literary representation performed a particular flexion in writing by and about women. The result of this gynocritical attention, appropriate as it is and was, inadvertently effected the canonization of the middle-class heroine. These women were heroines of relative means and education, experience and expertise. They were "worthy" of canonical attention in the eloquence and force of their writing back to and against their own marginalization, both as authors and subjects. Their respectable standing, education, and class meant that they could not be ignored, but had to be accommodated in the ever-changing sand city of canonical castles.

The ensuing ferment quickly recognized that race and class amplified these gender issues. Women's newly strong voice, and gender's torsion in terms of identity politics in Canadian and American writing then opened the door to other

considerations, less mainstream and more quotidian in their preoccupations. Increasingly, distinctions of power and class came under scrutiny and provided a scrutiny of their own. Racial marginalization drew particular attention; and women's work (its enactment and contingent necessity) became the subject of subversive narratives, with an increasing focus on the dirt under the fingernails of previously pristine heroines.

Evident then, in various narratives after 1975, were women engaged with "dirty work," women who got their hands dirty and whose dubious professions did not preclude their availability as narrative subjects. Alternative explorations of the *picara* began to appear, as did other texts examining women's relationship to work and its attendant revisions. The extent to which women's narratives struggled to grapple with the ongoing rub of necessity versus choice in terms of work, resulted in major revisions to women's explorations of self, and spearheaded a departure from the fetishized focus on the psychological journeys of largely privileged women. Within this rubric, texts concerned with besmirchment and *nettoyage* take on a particular resonance, for they gesture implicitly toward the requirement that woman (both author and subject) must be "clean," must meet a certain measure of textual respectability in order to enjoy the anointment of canonicity. This respectability can be cloaked in poverty or lack of experience, which will be rectified by the heroine's appropriate acquisition of wisdom; nevertheless, it identifies the gap between the heroine worthy of canonization and the heroine who remains beyond the pale. Even the now-accepted erosion of the distinctions between high and low culture and the suggestion that the bourgeois individualist subject has died does not quite attenuate the repeated inscription of the redeemable and to a large extent respectable woman, the heroine who "comes to terms" with her challenges and who undergoes a transformation that enables her metamorphosis. The retrofit of a gender-friendly canon was subtly employed to underscore the paradigm of a heroine guarded rather than garrulous, restrained rather than intemperate. What agitation filtered into the still-architecturally selective canon had done so despite the foreign body of woman. Intrusions, inundations, and injuries to a relatively standard and authoritative totality could thus be accommodated by absorption, and by such osmosis rendered relatively anodyne.

Much has been said about consensus and canonicity, critical reception and pre-disposition. Any canonical revision must reconcile multiple aspirations and contingencies. As Dominick LaCapra (1989: 5) astutely observes, literary works themselves recite "complex, internally divided relations to their contexts of creation and use". There is, then, an argument for the internal context of a work to unpack a problem of canonicity, one that gestures toward the tools within the narrative rather than the actual plot content or aesthetic achievement of the text. This focus on quotidian action can falter by virtue of its domestic marginality. For example, is it important to know and to observe what characters eat, or is it more

important that they do eat, starvation and satiety markers of societal rank? Is it important to witness the washerwoman scrubbing a character's clothing, or is it more important to understand the metaphorical import of clean clothing for a reformed sinner? The weight attached to such rites of passage as represented within literature is undeniable; but behind those rites resides a material labor that subverts the ascendancy of the ritual as embodying high literary aspiration and, by extension, canonical marker. For while the concept of liminality readily carries the burden of transition (coming of age, acceptance into a community, completion of a pilgrimage, naming, or recognition), its abstraction does not accommodate the concrete enactment or impetus of the symbolic transformation. Here is a space where gender trouble and canon disorder can fruitfully intersect. And here is where we can locate domestic labor of the ilk that has always been relegated to instrument rather than focal point.

What follows will undertake to explore the citation and location of laundry work and refreshed linen as a narrative trope that denounces the framings of canon, using the lens of how narrative representations of laundry take on the perplexingly encumbered space allotted to female subjects. Besmirchment as a convenient marker related to class and race is relevant; so too is the sensationalisation of dirt and the regularization of cleanliness and order as representative of a "civilized" society. This discussion locates whiteness (both human and textile) as a marker of moral superiority, but also looks closely at the temptations and revelations of soil and sin as a powerful adjunct to these discussions. The films *Quills* and *The Magdalene Sisters* specifically utilize laundry (the place where linen is refreshed) as the location where the canonical story of incarceration and rehabilitation is both enforced and usurped. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's historical novel, *Alias Grace*, permits Grace Marks to launder (to tell from her own perspective, as an incarcerated prisoner) the story of her involvement in a murder, a murder back-dropped by Grace's own skill as a maidservant and laundress. Kate Grenville's Australian novel, *Joan Makes History*, employs the washerwoman as an historian or chronicler of human foibles; she divines from the laundry that she washes the events that will transpire and that will ultimately be reformed as "official" history. By contrast, the Canadian Chinese laundries depicted in Judy Fong Bates' collection of short stories, *China Dog*, make the laundry a site of separation, outside of the town's history in terms of the treatment that the Chinese laundrymen are accorded. Nevertheless, those same laundrymen re-name the men who control the story, take back the power of identification. Ultimately, their presence in the Canadian story will transform the canon of naming, laundry as the page on which a new story is written. Finally, Maxine Hong Kingston's account of growing up in a Chinese laundry in San Francisco speaks the unspeakable by crossing the fine line between silence and speech. Her memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, transplants Chinese women from their original mythology and history to the uncertain life of Chinese immigrants

in the United States. The literal and figurative depiction of the laundry work that feeds them gestures toward the terrible exclusions of a canon where the eradication of a culture's dirt is accompanied by a muting or mutilation of those who accomplish this important task.

Why laundry rather than a more codified or creative domestic activity? To a considerable extent, women's value as mothers and wives is now celebrated within canonical fiction, but those inscriptions again push heroines toward the realm of acceptability and accommodation, the realm of fulfillment rather than filth. In a culture of convenient plasticity, the re-inscription of the canonical woman as accepting (pliant), understanding (self-effacing) and composed (confined) is a contraindication to the disintegrative and fragmenting forces of postmodern life. The epiphanies presented as resolutions for heroines of canonically-inclined texts are reflective of the extent to which the canon itself enforces conformity, all within the rubric already inscribed by master narratives still valiantly upholding rites of passage and well-rounded conclusions. Interruptions to this continuing tapestry are unusual; from this perspective, the depiction of a gendered, marginalized, and repulsive activity becomes useful for what it can tell us about the process of canonization and the very contingencies of such work and its import within novels that set out to interrogate their own distance from canonicity.

The over-arching metaphor that bedrocks this discussion pivots around nettoyage or cleaning, the erasure of soil, dirt, and experience, literally or in writing. In the 2000 film *Quills*, about the Marquis de Sade and his determination to write despite being denied paper, quills, and ink, linen carries the weight of medium for the imprisoned (and scandalously scandalizing) writer. First, his manuscript pages are smuggled out between the soiled linen that the laundry maid collects, but when that ruse is discovered and the writer is denied paper, he manages to use his bed linen as stationery. Finally, when ink and quills are denied him, he inscribes his words with the only writing tools remaining to him, his finger and his feces.

While the film makes no attempt to adhere to historical fact, the explicit connection between the act of writing as subversive activity and the soiling of linen as human expression –to a scatological extreme– recites a useful space from which to explore this intervention in canon construction. In *Quills*, the writer is male, although his subjects are frequently women, heroines both independent and oppressed. What is even more interesting, however, is the *letter de cachet* used against the historical writer –the Marquis de Sade. *Lettres de cachet* (or letters sealed) referred to orders issued under the old régime in France; persons deemed dangerous could be imprisoned or punished without trial. In the 18th century, these letters were often issued as blank warrants: the name of the marked subject could be filled in as convenient. Needless to say, *lettres de cachet* were frequently

the instrument used to confine or disable less than desirable members of society, prostitutes, lunatics, or inconvenient relatives. In direct contravention to *babeas corpus* then, *lettres de cachet* impose a fierce codification, rather like canonical guidelines, unstated but rigid in their requirements. The body and its evidentiary markings on linen or clothing –the line of dirt around a collar, grease spots down a lapel, stains under the armpits of a shirt– recites a refusal to obey a pre-scripted commandment. Such Rabelaisian frankness does not readily obey canonical guidelines, or more accurately, manners. The linen becomes holographic instrument in *Quills*, requiring the words to be transcribed to paper and then onwards in order to be disseminated. But by acting as page, the soiled sheets take on a resonance beyond their function.

To digress further, the laundry work of the incarcerated and horribly mistreated girls in the 2002 film *The Magdalene Sisters* (directed by Peter Mullan) is less a literal act of writing than a metaphorically produced text inspired by Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Deemed wild or unmanageable, the girls who are sent to the Magdalene Laundry are set to cleansing the besmirched linen of the community, most particularly the vestments of the priests. Required through their labor to purify the impure, they are condemned to this grotesque existence by virtue of their own purported impurity –they have broken the rules, behaved badly, or gotten themselves pregnant, all indices of a refusal to adhere to acceptable or restrictive mores or behaviors. The foul steam and heat, the mess and filth that they toil to purge, is meant to accomplish their own purgation and purification, but of course, the miasma of such a heap of befoulment purifies nothing, but punishes most severely. What is written here is the figure of the girl/woman refusing to obey expectation, and then being subsequently chastised by the requirement that she slave to meet expectation. Laundry is not an occasion in aid of writing in this latter case, but a metaphor for erasure, the dirt of the body effaced from cloth, the dirt of the rebellious expunged from their desires, actions, even memories.

What possible relation does the conundrum proposed by the work of laundry in its transformation from dirty to clean have to the ongoing project of canonicity? While this connection might seem capricious, the costumes that humans wear, their particular details, reflect standards, values, and traditions, the same elements that inflect canon-formation. Although the care of those same outward manifestations is usually visible only in the moment of wearing or employment, cleanliness and decorum ephemeral and time-specific, the ongoing ritual of laundering and its metaphorical weight gesture toward the larger enterprise of human value, presentation and hygiene. Canon-formation, inclusion in an inherently exclusive declaration of history and culture, is ultimately an act of ordering, measuring, and valuing, but the process toward such a regularized body must of necessity be disorderly. In its exquisitely

knowing contact with both contamination and spotlessness, laundry presents a powerful trope for more abstract considerations of our constructed literary tradition, the tradition that reads our reading, as we read its body.

Laundry as both task and domestic verity has occupied an evasive and evaded position in the material world of necessary tasks. Its representation in literature and art underscores that sidelining. From the first reference to laundry in Homer's *The Odyssey* (Odysseus' meeting with Nausikaa and her handmaidens washing their clothes by the seashore –their ablutions the goddess Athene's pretext to provide the shipwrecked Odysseus with a way into what would otherwise be a closed city to him), to contemporary depictions of laundry in the films cited above, laundry (both the action and the clothing) serves as a vehicle of intervention. Inevitably the work of laundry is presented as instrument assisting a goal more significant than the sanitations at hand. The readerly capacities of the laundress are disregarded and the textual interventions of those pages she deciphers as part of her labor are dismissed as mere domestic trace. Abstract critical declensions tend to overlook common effluent or soil.

Yet here is presented a brilliant opportunity to disorder the accepted canon of progress and knowledge. An overtly telling example occurs within the historical *tour de force*, *Joan Makes History*, a novel by Australian writer Kate Grenville. Grenville is not North American, but a proud descendent of those who were transported with the First Fleet to Australia in 1788. Her rendering of history, however, echoes the colonial history of both Canada and the United States, and is evocative as a literary signpost. The settler story occupies an uneasy space within the North American canonical mythology of arrival, “discovery,” colonization, and occupation. Grenville's fictional exegesis of the role that women performed within that nation-building trajectory is worth examining for its parody of social order and canonical reward. *Joan Makes History* (and the “making” is a pun of no small magnitude) rummages past the “official” story to argue for a history inflected by women, a history of different priorities and magnitudes. And key to this alternative saga is an unseating of hierarchies and valorizations. Heroic deeds are subsumed by small gestures, strutting ceremony is undercut by private delight, a proliferation of positions. History is rendered domestic, dignified occasions reduced to sweat and mildew and laughter. The “Joan” of the book's title refers to a series of characters, all named Joan, who parallel the development of a canonical Australia over the two hundred years between 1788 and 1988. All of these Joans are rebels of a sort, who “wished not to marry history but to make it” (Grenville 1988: 49). These Joans scorn the limited repertoire of those satisfied with being handmaidens to history, who merely wanted to “marry a prospect, to be the colorless wife of an ambition, to wash the socks and underpants of a destiny” (1988: 48). These Joans labor and toil to clear a small spot within the master narrative, but inevitably relegated to a gendered declension, make little headway against the formal framings of culture and power.

Yet the opportunity for canonical unseating is present in the mistress narrative of daily life, and one of these Joans enacts an astonishingly subversive reading of the plodding calendric of time itself.

I was nothing but the laundry woman: I was a down-at-heel person who came humbly to the back entrances of all the grand houses on the hill, and spent my days scrubbing things on a ridged board, my hands growing puffy from the big bar of yellow soap. I scrubbed at soiled collars, cuffs full of gravy, socks full of holes: I poked at bed linen tangling in the copper, and heaved and grunted afterwards, hoisting the dripping sheets up into the sun on the clothes-prop. (Grenville 1988: 96-97)

She is “nothing,” humble, working class, even grotesque, her puffy hands manifesting her occupation. The hard work of the washer woman signals her marginal standing; a servant, she must use “the back entrances of all the grand houses on the hill”. In canonical terms, she is, like all washerwomen, an un-canonized figure, diminished and yet, in readerly terms, in charge of the story by virtue of being in a position to read what no one else sees. Mistress of the subtext, she provides a declension for a larger standard, the postulator of domestic verity. Joan accomplishes this postulation by reciting for us her week, day by day.

Of a Monday I was to be found scrubbing for Mrs Cassell and her household, and of a Tuesday it was the Bigelows’ endless pinafores and embroidered bibs, and the lawn nightdresses, full of the smell of mother’s milk that could not wait for a babe’s suck. Poor Mrs Bigelow seemed fertile to a fault, and I had traced the progress of her fallings (the sudden way there were no rags to wash), her confinements (the bloodied sheets and towels), and the growth of her many infants on her good rich milk. (Grenville 1988: 97)

Joan’s litany of the homes where she scrubs begins by listing the names of the families, but she barely reaches Tuesday before she begins to interrupt the week’s strict order with her own commentary on what the laundry has told her about Mrs Bigelow’s many pregnancies and children. Joan is intimately familiar with bodily tracings that are generally concealed or private: menstruation, pregnancy, confinement, and nursing. And her reading skills proceed from strict observation to critique and evaluation, a miniature unpacking of societal opinion and pretense: “Of a Wednesday there were the gigantic pantaloons of Mrs Cotterill, who was a widow and liked a fresh tablecloth every other day and clean sheets twice a week, so my Wednesdays were busy, her lines all full of those vast pantaloons that filled with the wind and tugged gaily at the rope while the tablecloths snapped and flapped around them” (Grenville 1988: 97).

The identification of Mrs Cotterill as a widow who enjoys the luxury of clean linen, possibly because her domestic world is not encumbered by male demands, shifts the reading of the laundry away from the model wife and mother embodied by the fertile Mrs Bigelow. And the widow is mere prelude to women who fall even further beyond the pale and certainly outside of marital respectability.

Thursday was my day at Mrs Ridge's establishment, where no lady had ever set foot, but many females of light laughs and loose lips, and most of the gentlemen of this town, and here there were copperfuls of sheets until I was sick to death of their weight through the wringer, and endless slippery piles of underthings: chemises, slips, petticoats, nightdresses, pantaloons as provocative and unlike poor Mrs Cotterill's as possible: endless piles of slithering tantalizing garments, and not much else, just a few collars if Mrs Ridge's gentleman Norman had favored her with his presence that week. (Grenville 1988: 97)

The excess of the "slithering tantalizing garments" is in contradiction to the "weight" of the many sheets that are used in Mrs. Ridge's brothel, residence of the transgressing women who provide relief to the canonically privileged "gentlemen of this town".

Cleverly, laundress Joan covers the gamut of the disreputable to the sanctified, where the elevated interpreter of holy texts must be guarded by a maiden sister who polices the "fun" of the washing with chilly disapproval.

Fridays were sombre days at the rectory, where cups of tea for the washerwoman were not very forthcoming, and Miss Skinner the reverend's sister inspected every tedious bit of starched surplice and bib and bit of fine clergyman's lace, and counted the wine-stained double damask napkins used at Communion. I did not feel inclined to sing over my scrubbing or enjoy a bit of a joke with Bridget in the kitchen at dinnertime, because Miss Skinner had a habit of gliding up behind people on her silent feet and giving a laughing person a nasty fright. (Grenville 1988: 97-98)

*Jouissance* is dampened, creativity (at least what creativity Joan can muster in her trodden life) is here subjected to canonical disapproval. Respect the damask that accompanies worship of the authoritative text as interpreted by the authoritative male or she will be denied access to that sanctified story. Miss Skinner as new critic is here indubitably implicated in the trappings of canonicity, religion's determination as a set and measured story that cannot be interrupted or disrupted.

But Joan does not conclude with religion and its ritual. She finishes her litany of work by returning to her own humble dwelling where she "takes in" washing for those not yet wealthy enough to pay her come to them. She becomes



receptacle, the “taking in” denoting her role as one who gathers the story and its principles together, even though her version is never accorded canonical authority.

My Saturday was not my own, but it was at least in my own home, for Saturday was the day I took in the washing of the Purvises, the McElroys, and the Russells, and that Knightley: all optimistic folk, but either not prosperous enough just yet to have my services in their own establishments, or in Knightley’s case, being bachelor gentlemen requiring little washing done. (Grenville 1988: 98)

Joan’s story then is her ability to parse others through her intimate inspection of the clothing that she launders. The owners can hide no secrets from her, and she unpacks a veritable history of civilization in her observations, the same civilization that decrees what is and what is not worthy. Thorough, assiduous, and almost clairvoyant in her reading of grass stains and bloodied handkerchiefs, Joan deciphers the mysteries of human process, but in a decidedly uncanonical way. Knowing her own marginality, Joan nevertheless persists in exercising an imagination, an imagination that she applies to those items of linen and clothing that she is weekly on such intimate terms with. Illiterate and othered, she nevertheless critiques the exclusion of such women as she is from the canonical project: “although I seemed no one and could not as much as spell my own name, I was someone, though someone whose name would quickly be forgotten for never having been written down” (Grenville 1988: 100). Her role is to impose cleanliness on the dirtied, order on disorder. Magically refreshing the laundry she washes in her once-a-week ritual, she nevertheless recites that one element that the literate and privileged always forget: a disorderly, unstructured or unexpected interpretation and evaluation works behind the glossy construction of what is deemed acceptable; its inventive misrule may enact an alterity that contravenes static citations of value.

Otherness and rebellion then collude with the silent apparatus of secrecy and invisibility, laundry’s cultural aesthetic requiring erasure rather than declaration. Stains and soil must be effaced, and only decorative markings, those that are “intentional,” announce their presence with impunity. Lustrations and expurgations are thus inevitably relegated to a surface pathology, one deemed beneath lofty considerations of the soul or the human spirit or aesthetic transcendence. Such willful division is troubling and implicitly valorizes the abstract as compared to the doggedly concrete. Work itself, while treated as part of the discourse on class, becomes mere abstraction, an expressive device that cannot escape its own horizon of expectation. This re-inscribes then the comfort of a value-laden and oppressively narrow measurement, leaving outside the canon the pragmatism of necessity. Indigence and illiteracy, misrule and misdirection then are barred from canonical anointment, or are included within

such company primarily as a measure of relief or entertainment. Witness the rather coy inclusion of Rabelais and the carnivalesque as escape routes, relief from the ur-philosophical. Matters of digestion or desire are thus kept firmly in their place, and officially sanctioned rules and texts can afford to wink at insignificant sin.

It is unsurprising then that laundry is often depicted within an institutional framework. As is evident in the previously cited film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, the work of laundry can serve to discipline and punish, can keep a willfully imaginative mind at bay because the hands are so thoroughly occupied. By virtue of its association with jails, hospitals or hotels, all bastions of regulation, laundry then evokes a criminal halitosis, perspiring underclass. In early novels depicting laundry work (Zola's *L'Assommoir*, for example), the laundress, who is supposed to embody physical and moral cleanliness, instead suffers the corrupting influence of the *blanchisserie* and takes on the tinge of the dirty linen she cleans, an osmosis making her resemble her occupation. "The vulgarity of the *blanchisseuse*, her preoccupation with sensuality, appear as a natural consequence not only of the knowledge gained through the laundering of personal garments, but also of the sexual *disponibilité* and indolence engendered by inhaling the body's odors emitted by the soiled clothing" (Donaldson-Evans 1992: 159). A moral profile of laundresses is implicit in readings of this nature. And even more fascinating is a repeated connection between the abattoir and the laundry, the deliberate connection between animal smells, the stench of death, and of soiled linen. In this context, "the moralizing discourse of hygiene" (Donaldson-Evans 1992: 155), its bourgeois imperative, dominates depictions of laundry workers. A hygienist discourse would hold that the corrupt are in charge of the cardinal virtue of cleanliness; the laundry is the "meeting point between filth and cleanliness" (Donaldson-Evans 1992: 159). Intimate but functional act, this declension connects women to the management of dirt, requiring that they keep moral slime, degeneracy, and contamination at bay. If they do not, they will be punished, excluded from canonical space and imprisoned within a construct, virtual or real.

It is perhaps Margaret Atwood's obviously canonized position as a writer that frees her to explore this conundrum in her novel about the "celebrated murderess" (Atwood 1996: 22), Grace Marks. *Alias Grace* introduces a gender contamination that questions the construction of a heroine, using that historical "celebrated murderess" to serve this end. Atwood's novel undertakes to examine the incarcerated Grace Marks (and the crime she was accused of) from the perspective of various authorities, most particularly Dr. Simon Jordan, who seeks to make his mark in the field of mental illness. As Atwood's "Afterword" summarizes, "Grace Marks was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s, having been convicted of murder at the age of sixteen" (1996: 463). It is not only Grace's marginal position (as maid and murderess) that makes this novel a challenge to canonicity, but the extent to which her story serves as a lens

for the textual depositions of women like Grace. Poor, part of the serving class, girls without protection who had to make their way in a world often capricious in its treatment of servants, they occupied a contingent position both in terms of actuality and art. Atwood asserts that the murder and trial garnered attention because “the combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes was most attractive to the journalists of the day” (1996: 463). The scattered traces of the story as contained within penitentiary records, the popular press of the time, and as recounted by Susanna Moodie in her 1853 book, *Life in the Clearings*, together propose Grace Marks as a discursive site from which to examine the elements that determine whether a story is authoritative or apocryphal. Ultimately, even Atwood’s intricately disturbing fictional depiction resorts to a provocative mesmerism.

Unsurprisingly, although she is described as a “serving maid” (Atwood 1996: 11), before the murder and her arrest, Grace Marks worked as a laundress, laundry very much a part of service work. In the present time of the novel, Grace is again performing as a maid, but now in the home of the Governor of the Penitentiary, assisting in the kitchen, the scullery, or the laundry. She is content with these tasks; “I always liked doing the laundry, it is hard work and roughens the hands, but I like the clean smell afterwards” (1996: 64). Her performance is not simply a matter of doing household chores; she contributes to the caché that the Governor’s wife enjoys by virtue of parading this “celebrated murderess” in front of her friends. “She must make the most of her social position and accomplishments, and although an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well, I am also one of the accomplishments” (1996: 22). The enigmatic text of Grace Marks, then, is given considerable scrutiny, as if it might provide an answer to the inscrutable source of her criminality.

The implicit interrogation behind Atwood’s own fictional revision to the many versions of Grace Marks is where she (as character and historical figure) fits into the larger story of nineteenth-century Canada: the canonical depiction of immigration, work, and the social and cultural milieu of this period. As convicted criminal, Grace becomes a version of *tabula rasa* on which both the scandalized and titillated can inscribe their own voyeuristic fears and fetishes. The difficulty provoked by her intervention in the structured narrative of master and servant, powerful and powerless, rich and poor, clean and dirty is exactly that, a tear or fissure in the accepted and heavily stratified social fabric, a soiling of its clean linen. As such an uncontainable and unpredictable actor, Grace Marks first forces her audience to mistrust the usual outcome of the historical drama of hard work and redemption. Second, Atwood’s fictionalization of her story forces revisionist readers to question the canonical inscription of 19th century women. The doubleness of Grace’s actions is then mirrored and complicated by the doubleness of these readings, and even further refracted by

the *dédoublement* or “disassociation of personality” (Atwood 1996: 466) that Atwood’s Grace experiences.

The ordinary work that Grace does signals her story as unexceptional, purely part of the economy of the time. She herself treats her employment with a matter-of-fact detail that does not quite hide her own pride in her skill.

I help the regular laundress, old Clarrie, who is part coloured and used to be a slave once, before they did away with it here. She is not afraid of me, she doesn’t mind me or care what I may have done, even if I killed a gentleman; she only nods, as if to say, So that’s one less of them. She says I am a steady worker and pull my share and don’t waste the soap, and I know the treatment of fine linen, I have the way of it, and also how to get out the stains, even from the blonde lace, which is not easy to come by; and a good clear starcher too, and can be trusted not to burn the things in ironing, and that is enough for her. (Atwood 1996: 64-65)

The treatment of fine linen is then a gift or a talent, even though Grace’s treatment of the gentleman she worked for (the murder effectively destroys “fine linen”) was less than trustworthy. The washerwoman’s zone of knowledge is lightly drawn here, but Grace comes to this skill by virtue of her early apprenticeship under her friend, Mary Whitney, who taught her “what [she] needed to know” (1996: 157). In those happier times, when Grace has just begun to work for Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, in “one of the finest houses in Toronto” (1996: 147), she is set “to assist Mary with the rinsing and the wringing out, and the hanging up and the folding and the mangling and mending” (1996: 157). The study of this skill is augmented by Mary’s advising Grace in the politics of subservience and survival with relation to the rich.

She said that the trick of it was to have the work done without it ever being seen to be done; and if any of them was to surprise you at a task, you should simply remove yourself at once. In the end, she said, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all. (Atwood 1996: 158)

Within a household narrative where servants are meant to function invisibly, absolutely outside of any canonical consideration, Grace is advised to “remove” herself if encountered. The additional suggestion that with the refreshment of linen comes a privileged knowledge that empowers these servants, even though they are invisible, contributes to the potential for a narrative where that knowledge is both empowering and dangerous, leading to an inversion of the expectation that a servant must efface herself. Such rude shocks to canonical order can form the basis of a new subversion.

There are early suggestions that the laundry holds more secrets than its mere utility. Although Grace loves “the smell of a laundry dried outside” (Atwood 1996: 159), she is frightened of the same linens and shirts and nightgowns when they are hung inside: “in the grey twilight of the drying room, they looked different, like pale ghosts of themselves hovering and shimmering there in the gloom; and the look of them, so silent and bodiless, made me afraid” (1996: 159). Mary, who will later be identified as the *double* inhabiting Grace, is quick to recognize Grace’s fear. She “would hide behind the sheets, and press up against them so there was the outline of her face, and give out a moaning sound; or she would get behind the nightshirts and make their arms move” (1996: 159-160). Linen then becomes the ghost text that tracks the knowledge that the servants possess; it carries the impress of all sins; and even predicts the ghosts that will haunt the story. Mary, who dies from a botched abortion, actually dies because as a laundry maid she is beneath the social standing of Mr. George Alderman Parkinson, who has gotten her pregnant. That the servants are mere meat is emphasized by the smell of wet straw and blood from the mattress where Mary expires. It is the smell, says Grace, of “a butcher’s shop” (1996: 177), with Mary compared to “a carcass hung up at the butcher’s” (1996: 178). And their mistress, Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, declares that the story of Mary’s death will be censored. “Out of respect to the dead we will not say what Mary died of. We will say it was a low fever. That will be best for all” (Atwood 1996: 177-78). Mary is thus excluded from the “official” story of her own death, as effectively effaced as the blood that Grace must scrub away.

I bundled the sheet and the nightdress together and took them down to the laundry, and pumped a tub full of cold water, because it’s the cold water you need to get out the blood, as the hot will set it... And I scrubbed and much of the blood came out, making the water all red; and I ran that down the drain and pumped another tubful, and left the things to soak, with some vinegar poured in to help with the smell. (Atwood 1996: 179)

Whatever the servants know does not help them to gain a place in the authoritative story. Their knowledge can be applied pragmatically, or can be dismissed as being beneath consideration, a lesser and less refined information than that possessed by the rich and educated. But all knowledge is dangerous, and when it does enter narrative, can provoke an unexpected backlash.

As listener and audience to Grace Marks’ story, Dr. Jordan is charmed by her account of her domestic life, thinking that her philosophical ruminations on quilts as flags and on beds (where birth, death, and sex occur) are fanciful. His cavalier misreading of her tale reflects his own sense of entitlement by virtue of his superior position, underscored for us by Grace’s watching him write. “I [. . .] watch his hand moving over the paper, and think it must be pleasant to have the knack of writing so quickly, which can only be done by practice, like playing the

piano" (Atwood 1996: 161). That he does not recognize the extent to which Grace controls her own narrative is evident in his susceptibility to her story, even though Grace suggests: "Surely you do not want to hear about such ordinary things, and daily life" (1996: 162). In fact, he follows her tale with "personal pleasure" (1996: 185), the indulgence of the well-off listener for whom domestic detail is romantic, until her account of the death of Mary Whitney, which sickens him; "he feels as if he has just come from an abattoir" (1996: 185). His complicity in the deaths of all the Mary Whitneys (young maids who are taken advantage of) who remain outside of the canonical fold does not occur to him; instead, he remembers his own first kiss, which he extracted, of course, from a maidservant. Later, he dreams that "he's in a fenced yard where laundry flaps on a line. No one else is there, which gives him a sensation of clandestine pleasure. The sheets and linens move in the wind, as if worn by invisible swelling hips, as if alive" (1996: 194). To Dr. Jordan, the dream signals laundry as erotic encounter, the cloth standing in for the hair of "an unseen woman," but that same disembodiment declares the extent to which such work and its outcome is disembodied, and those who accomplish it are excluded from canonical consideration.

Grace is uniquely connected to this form of *nettoyage*. She smells like "smoke, and laundry soap" (Atwood 1996: 90), markers of her class. When Dr. Jordan assures her that she can be frank with him, she reminds him that her character is already delineated by her crime, and so her speaking cannot alter her circumstances: "I was never a lady, Sir, and I've already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don't wish to, I needn't say anything at all" (1996: 90). Her frank disclosure that she is long past participating in the elaborate rituals of refinement and respectability is the key to her "confession"; the doctor, however, does not recognize this essential distinction and continues to wait for the salacious details of what happened, her participation in the crime. He tries to "open her up like an oyster" (1996: 133), as if she could be so pried apart. His own embarrassment is to Grace's advantage; she knows more about the restrictions that confine him than he does and the narrative confirms that relative discrimination. For example, when he rents rooms from his landlady, he is unable to inquire if laundry services are included. "So fastidious and stern was she when he was arranging for the rooms, that he'd found it embarrassing to ask whether washing was included. Her manner had implied that she was not in the habit of discussing the state of men's personal items with them, such painful matters being best left to the servants" (1996: 75). And he declares to Miss Lydia that he believes that "Women should not attend such grisly spectacles [executions]" because "they pose a danger to their refined natures" (1996: 87). More trapped by canonical renderings of the female sex as genteel or delicate than he knows, Grace is able to play to this credulousness. Indeed, Grace's "refinement" or lack thereof is a matter of some speculation on the parts of all who encounter her, except perhaps Clarrie, the laundress, who cares only that she do her job well.

Work is the site where Grace demonstrates her own value as a subject; she is interested in doing her job well, and in the respect her labor should garner. This gap between her duties as a serving maid and the less than clear expectations that she encounters when she accepts employment with Thomas Kinnear leads Grace toward her crime. At first she is pleased with the situation she has taken.

In the courtyard between the two kitchens there were three lines strung up for the washing. There was no separate laundry room, but the things for the washing, the coppers and the washtub and scrubbing board, were at present in the summer kitchen beside the stove, all good quality; and I was pleased to see they did not make their own soap but used bought soap, which is far easier on the hands." (Atwood 1996: 212)

Grace prefers simply to do her work within the parameters expected of her, but the blurring of the lines between servant and mistress disorder her perspective. Still, she proceeds with her duties.

The next day was a fine fair day with a breeze, and so I did the wash, and high time too as clean things were running short. It was hot work, as I had to keep the fire in the summer kitchen stove going at a brisk rate; and I'd had no chance to sort and soak the things the night before; but I could not risk waiting, as at that time of year there could be a quick change in the weather. So I scrubbed and rubbed, and got it all hung up nicely at last, with the napkins and the white pocket-handkerchiefs neatly spread out on the grass to bleach. There were snuff stains, and ink stains, and grass stains on a petticoat of Nancy's—I wondered how she had got them, but she had most likely slipped and fallen down. (Atwood 1996: 224)

Simply by doing the wash, her proximity to stains, Grace acquires more knowledge than she wants, and that knowledge contributes to her confusion about her role in the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. Invested in order and in the banishment of dirt, Grace becomes entangled by the metaphorical weight of the contradictory bargains struck between cleanliness and dirt, appearance and admission, the private and the public.

Cleanliness is a display, a declaration; as Grace muses, "they do say that cleanliness is next to Godliness" (Atwood 1996: 225). But Grace's investment in purity is undermined by the unconventional situation at Kinnear's, where the symbolic upsetting of convention mangles both her dreams and her waking hours. On the day of the murders, she dreams that she sees headless angels sitting in judgment on Kinnear's house; when she wakes, she goes outside to find that the laundry she had done the day before has blown into the trees. She observes, "the nightdresses and shirts which were stuck in the trees did indeed

look like angels without heads; and it was as if our own clothing was sitting in judgment upon us” (1996: 281). The elaborate cosmologies of pollution symbols (Douglas 1966) thus serve notice of impending disorder. This mirror-moment of Grace’s earlier recognition that Nancy Montgomery is pregnant, and thus at risk (as Mary Whitney was), leads to the conclusive “She was in trouble” (Atwood 1996: 276), ambiguously referring to both Nancy and Grace in terms of their impending contact with death.

Canonically, women are expected to enforce morality, to hold and restrain it at the same time. When the bed linen is a shambles, they are expected to wash out the stains; when the narrative is disrupted, they are expected to serve the roles required by their gender. It is not surprising that Nancy Montgomery’s body is found under the washtub, or even more indelicately stated, “her dead legs sticking out from under the washtub” (Atwood 1996: 22). If washing is configured as a vanishing act (making dirt invisible), then the vanishing act of murder is close to laundry in its impetus; it is an attempt to erase some pollution. After the murder, when Grace at last is able to sleep, she imagines the soothing effects of water, and her very footsteps “being erased”. “On the edge of sleep I thought: It’s as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains, I have left no marks. And that way I cannot be followed” (1996: 342). Grace has been, in that dream, laundered to purity and innocence, a return to a cosmology where she is canonically undisruptive because she has been quite simply erased.

Uncomfortable as such disruptions to canonical expectation are, the effect is multiplied by the additional disturbance of race. If the project of canon-formation is valuation, then the weight of white male proscription is particularly difficult to shift when laundry, race and gender together stir the aesthetic *mélange*. In Judy Fong Bates’ 1997 collection of short fiction, *China Dog and Other Stories*, the presence of the Chinese laundry discomfits the smug setting of the Canadian small town as cohesive entity within the Canadian literary canon. In these almost tangentially framed stories, the town’s hegemonic whiteness and uniformity is interrupted by the necessary but othered members of the community who are Chinese. The narrator of “The Gold Mountain Coat” relates this situation almost limpidly. “The small town that was my home was typical of many small towns in Ontario” (Bates 2005: 25). She goes on to enumerate its canonical sameness: it has schools and churches, a funeral home and post office.

The main street of our small town had a dime store that sold everything from *Evening in Paris* perfume to stationery and hammers. It also had a clothing store, a jewellery shop, a hardware store, a drugstore, a barber shop, and a restaurant that served Canadian food. And, typical of all small towns, it also had a Chinese restaurant and a Chinese hand laundry. (Bates 2005: 25-26)



The almost seamless predictability of this small town is presented as being so “typical,” that it is virtually a stage set for the execution of a predetermined *lebenswelt*. The two Chinese businesses interrupt this unruffled surface by virtue of their difference, a difference that the narrator remarks. “My father operated the hand laundry and the other Chinese family managed the Chinese restaurant. I was the only Chinese child in the town” (Bates 2005: 26). Such isolation makes it difficult, indeed almost impossible to accomplish any intervention in the standard weave of community.

The work that the Chinese hand laundry performs for the small town is inescapable and inevitable: the laundry must purify the town’s pollution even as the Chinese family who run the laundry are considered polluting to the norm’s impenetrable whiteness. In the story “Eat Bitter,” when Hua Fan arrives in Canada to assist his “uncle” in his laundry, he immediately remarks the line between the town and his uncle’s business.

Just inside the door was the handmade wooden counter that would separate Hua Fan and Elder Uncle from the customers when the business was open. On the other side of the counter was a wall lined with wooden shelves on which there were neatly stacked packages of finished laundry wrapped in brown paper. Along another wall were two “ironing beds,” each a roughly made wooden table covered with old blankets, topped with an old sheet—all tightly tucked under the wooden surface and secured with nails. Elder Uncle walked past the brown-papered bundles and pushed aside a heavy green and red flowered curtain that divided the customer area from the washing section. In the middle of the floor was a monstrous looking washing machine. It was a massive grey metal barrel. Nestling inside was a similar-shaped wooden container punctured with holes the size of quarters. Carved into one side of both barrels were hinged doors where laundry was stuffed and removed. Hua Fan looked at the contraption, thinking that it resembled a giant insect with four metal legs standing inside a large metal pan with a drainage hole. To one side were three wooden laundry basins used for rinsing the clothes. A hand-cranked wringer was attached to the last basin and a tall stack of brown bamboo laundry hampers stood in the corner. Along another wall was a coal-burning stove for cooking and heating. Beside it stood the boiler. Hua Fan noticed a small bedroom off to one side. Inside were two narrow cots made of metal. (Bates 2005: 49-50)

The men are separated from their white customers by the counter; and their workspace is separated from customer service space. They themselves sleep right next to their work, identifying them with their labor more than any private or personal identity. Outsiders, they are relegated to doing domestic work, their difference feminized. And the clothing they must refresh is repulsive, rank with

unfamiliar sweat. “Hua Fan handled the socks gingerly. He picked them up with his thumb and index fingers. He was barely able to put his hand inside the first sock to turn it inside out. The acrid odour assaulted his nostrils and left him gasping for air” (Bates 2005: 52). The stench, the heat and humidity and the unrelenting pattern of the days, days where they sometimes work until two in the morning, inscribe their drudgery on Hua Fan and his uncle. The foul exhalations of the town’s filth all concentrate in the laundry, banished only by the sweat equity of these barely tolerated workers who struggle to make a living in this unfriendly milieu. The miasmatic exhalations bred in that cleansing site are released in a cloud of steam when the door to the back room is opened.

Despite the indispensable service that they provide to the community, the Chinese characters in these stories are emphatically isolated within this “typical” town, suffering manifold indignities, taunting, stoning, racist slurs and other humiliations. Meanwhile, the trappings of gentility and culture, white shirts and handkerchiefs, once dirtied, accumulate in the laundry to be refreshed, made spotless again. But the process of this repeated cleansing is brutal, requiring soaking, agitation, and rinsing. “Handkerchiefs were boiled to loosen the dried snot that floated to the top of the pot like a film of pale green algae” (Bates 2005: 53). The most despised of the community are thus in charge of expunging the filth of those who despise them. Instead of gratitude for this task, the community conveys to those same laundry workers gestures suggesting they would like to expunge them. Although the Chinese perform a surface ingratiation (the doubleness of a monstrous and feminized position), they comfort themselves with small acts of ironic revenge, not physical but textual and linguistic. When a customer drops off a bundle of dirty clothing, Elder Uncle carefully writes inside the collars of the shirts: “I don’t know what their names are” Elder Uncle explains to Hua Fan. “They don’t know mine either. But I give them names. That one’s Big Nose. There’s Crooked Mouth Uncle, Doctor Uncle, Banker Uncle. They’re no trouble. But some are terrible, like Drunk Uncle. But the worst is Shitty Pants Uncle. Never mind, though, as long as they pay” (Bates 2005: 51). The gap between canonical text and revised canon is emphasized by the fact that the dominant characters cannot name their servants, while the marginalized characters name their masters by how they look, what they do, and how they act. Elevated philosophical characteristics, and even the authority of naming is then completely undercut, and the ambiguous but deliberately identifying black ink marks debunk the “superiority” of the town’s leading citizens. The explicit intervention here is that the non-canonical and silenced will nevertheless insert themselves into a space and place, despite not being “typical”. The contaminated thus mirror the filth that they regulate.

The regularization of the “body” within the canon is acutely present and yet most assiduously ignored. And while the body can perform its breathing and its movement, the bodies that work with the garments of other bodies are made

vulnerable by contact with their emanations. In Maxine Hong Kingston's ground breaking 1975 memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, the laundry sanitizes dirty clothing but does not cauterize memory or secrets. And while the title's eponymous ghosts refer to *lo fans* or whites, they are also the marginalized children of the Chinese families who will have to transcend the laundry where their journey begins. It is unsurprising that Maxine Hong Kingston feels choked by her story, and although her mother tells her she cut Maxine's frenum, cut her tongue loose to ensure that she "would not be tongue-tied" (Kingston 1989: 164), she suffers from a terrible silence. "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say 'hello' casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver" (1989: 165). The silence at first is a refuge, an enjoyable space that requires no explanation or intervention. Hong Kingston does not feel that she must escape it.

It was when I found out that I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks comes out of my throat. "Louder," said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl. (Kingston 1989: 166)

The voice excluded from the canon can barely whisper, cannot make enough sound to enter a textual space. Even as an adult, asking for the most straightforward information within a codified societal communication (the check-out counter, directions), Kingston is struck dumb, her voice stifled. Before starting junior high, and after an episode where she torments her silent Chinese twin (another little girl who will not or cannot speak), Kingston suffers a mysterious illness that permits her to stay away from school, and to enjoy a kind of Victorian vacation, watching the seasons change from a rented hospital bed in her family's living room. That eighteen month hiatus from the hard work of trying to intersect with a language and a culture that excludes her somehow gives her the strength to continue. Although she has "to figure out again how to talk" (Kingston 1989: 182), she begins to understand that she is choked by her family's secrets, immigration elisions that cannot be aired, all an extension of the consanguine dirt that her family erases and must disguise.

Maxine Hong Kingston's terrifying and indomitable mother tries to force her children to hold to Chinese tradition despite their American upbringing, their slow assimilation into the American melting pot. In that process of that inevitable acculturation the laundry serves as a liminal space, and the family who rely on the laundry business for their livelihood embody its role as a transformative site. The

laundry describes an ascending ladder of difference, from Kingston's own difference within her Chinese community to that community's difference from the American narrative that has ingested them. Work becomes the mantra of survival for Kingston's mother, the logos that she insistently embraces. Yet a laundry in San Francisco is no cleaner than a laundry in small town Ontario. "I put you babies in the clean places at the laundry, as far away from the germs that fumed out of the ghosts' clothing as I could. Aa, their socks and handkerchiefs choked me. I cough now because of those seventeen years of breathing dust. Tubercular handkerchiefs. Lepers' socks'" (Kingston 1989: 104-105). But the exquisite contamination of shared bodily vapors is not sufficiently "universal" for those same bodies to be offered space within a national canon.

Still, when she visits her mother years later, Kingston remembers the laundry almost nostalgically. While lying in bed, her mother sitting beside the bed, they revisit that work place.

In the midnight unsteadiness we were back at the laundry and my mother was sitting on an orange crate sorting dirty clothes into mountains—a sheet mountain, a white shirt mountain, a dark shirt mountain, a work-pants mountain, a long underwear mountain, a short underwear mountain, a little hill of socks pinned together in pairs, a little hill of handkerchiefs pinned to tags. Surrounding her were candles she burned in daylight, clean yellow diamonds, footlights that ringed her, mysterious masked mother, nose and mouth veiled with a cowboy handkerchief. (Kingston 1989: 105)

The astonishing appropriation of canonical "cowboy" imagery for these new Americans, the translation of the promise of "Gold Mountain" into the mountains of different articles of clothing, is here made mythic by the diamond light of the candles that Hong Kingston's mother burns to sear away the potential germs exuded by the dirty laundry, the ghost germs of the dominant American story.

This work and the complex construction of its accomplishment, as well as its metaphorical association with the erasure of filth, signals that laundry is not tangential to these texts, but pivotal to an entire re-thinking of this domestic paradigm as discursive intervention in what often resembles an impregnable canon-fortress. There are nudges toward a necessary reevaluation of domestic space and the female subject. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak refers to "global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item" (Spivak 1988: 308), but does not pursue the question of the "laundry list" itself as a useful but marginalized tool, one that glances at but refuses to scrutinize the extent to which the privileges of class, leisure, and cleanliness have served the canonical project. This submerged drama of the extraordinary ordinary argues for a

strenuous overhaul of an orthodox narrative oblivious to the quotidian elements –clean clothes, fresh linen– that drive survival and human dignity. While such domestic fragments ultimately illuminate corporeal rather than transcendental subjectivity, laundry suggests a material metaphor that embodies “historically instantiated power, knowledge, and subjectivity” (Cook 1992: 150). Foucault claims that the primary phenomena are not discursive but social, political, economic, and technical; his argument for the power of “the writing of things” (Foucault 1980) provides a theoretical flourish for laundry’s credibility as a fragrant disordering of any constructed canon. What is wonderful about this physical intervention is its profound celebration of what is concrete and inescapable. Ultimately, human frailty and filth together argue for a renovated literary canon, one aware that it cannot escape being plunged into boiling water.

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