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## "Identical Seeming Skins:" Identity and the Short Story in the Beggar Maid

In an oft-cited review of Alice Munro's fourth published collection, critic John Gardner asks a pertinent question regarding "whether *The Beggar Maid* is a collection of stories or a new kind of novel." While this question is not only germane, but even imperative to interpretation of Munro's work, Gardner's treatment of it is careless. He offers the question merely as rhetorical bait for his rave commentary, and his response is flippant: "I'm not quite sure, but whatever it is, it's wonderful." While this kind of flattering glibness is innocuous enough in quotation marks beneath the gloss of a paperback, Gardner's question unwittingly introduces – and foolishly dismisses – a crucial argument concerning the text it praises. No greater mistake can be made in approaching *The Beggar Maid* than to do so viewing it as a novel – whether "a new kind" or otherwise. The collection's primary thematic concern, the fragmented and mutable nature of identity, depends entirely on its narrative structure as a variety of distinct stories. In this collection, Munro exposes and rejects the notion of life and characterization as one continuous, linear progression, a myth inherently promoted by the novel form. Instead, Munro presents a worldview in which life occurs in isolated, sporadic moments – snapshots ungoverned by the potentially illusory laws of linear time. Identity in Munro is similarly fractured, fluid, and inconsistent. Munro's realism in *The Beggar Maid* is not the cohesive, chronological realism of the novel. The thesis of fragmented identity at the heart of the collection mirrors its narrative structure, and therefore depends on its reading as a series of short stories, separate but interlocking.

Other critics have approached the boundary between Munro as a novelist and a short story writer with more gravity than Gardner's unknowingly insouciant rhetoric. Hallvard Dahlie speculates that: "The more concentrated fictional form probably allows her to explore in a more imaginative and intense way the intangible aspects of her world: those shadowy and shifting areas between the rational and irrational, between the familiar, comfortable world and sudden dimensions of terror, and between various facets of uncertainty and illusion" (57). Addressing the issue in an interview, Munro herself displays a certain indifference to the distinction between longer and shorter narrative fiction, stating simply, "I don't feel that a novel is any step up from a short story" (qtd. in Dahlie 57). While Munro is apt in her rejection of any inherent disparity in sheer literary value between the two, the difference between the novel and the short story is profound in terms of analysis, structure, and the ever pertinent relationship between form and content. These shifts in structure allow, as Dahlie suggests, for the profound and vaguely unsettling permeability between reality and illusion, between the real and surreal in Munro's world.

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Munro begins to dismantle any notion of unified identity merely a few pages into the first story of the collection, “Royal Beatings.” In a surprisingly lyrical description of what are alternately called “bathroom noises” and, more delicately, “nether voices,” Munro makes a first divisive cut through any traditional concept of cohesive identity: “Even the tearing of a piece of toilet paper, the shifting of a haunch, was audible to those working or talking or eating in the kitchen. They were all familiar with each other’s nether voices, not only in their more explosive moments but in their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements. And they were all the most prudish people. So no one ever seemed to hear, or be listening, and no reference was made. The person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected with the person who walked out” (6). It is this last phrase that both introduces and cements the obscure and fluctuating role of identity in Munro’s otherwise determinedly realistic world. Identity in *The Beggar Maid* is willfully mutable, and can be fissured, dissociated, and obscured as necessary. This discussion of bathroom noises is initially called to mind in the narration by a similar illustration of Rose’s father, as Rose observes his private mutterings in his shed. Although there is nothing particularly disgraceful or obscene in these largely nonsensical monologues, Rose acknowledges a certain forbidden sanctity within them that renders her own overhearing somehow voyeuristic in nature. This tension, as well, is resolved by a compartmentalization of identity in the conclusion that: “The person who spoke these words and the person who spoke to her as her father were not the same, though they seemed to occupy the same space. It would be the worst sort of taste to acknowledge the person who was not supposed to be there; it would not be forgiven” (6). Here, Rose speaks to the unwritten rules that not only govern society, but also maintain social order on a much more intimate scale. There is a willingness – and perhaps a necessity – both within and among individuals to compartmentalize identity in this way, to make up for the accidentally voyeuristic nature of human interaction by tacitly agreeing to ignore undesirable overlaps of experience, thus preserving a calculated image of identity both in the self and the other.

Munro’s unabashed depiction of “bathroom noises” inevitably recalls the infamous defecating scene in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. While this revolutionary imagery defined modernism by pulling literary realism to new heights – or depths – of verisimilitude and intimacy, Munro’s incarnation of the scene in the latter half of the century pushes back, rewriting the rules of representative realism. While the Leopold Bloom who enters the “jakes” is, by all accounts, the same one who exits, Munro’s characters actively reject any assumed constant principle of identity. In Munro’s realism, the boundaries of identity that could once be safely assumed in representational literature become illusory and permeable.

This rupture or perhaps inversion of the “intimate and profound” realism frequently cited as a defining characteristic of Munro’s prose is often attributed more to her later works (qtd. in Clark 49). Miriam Marty Clark points specifically to a trend in *Friend of My Youth* and *Open Secrets* in which Munro’s increasing preoccupation with representation by intertextuality first permeates

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the boundaries of traditional realism, “denaturalizing realist representation and deconstructing its premises from within” (53). I would like to argue, however, that the disruption of realism that Clark attributes to these later works is strongly prefigured in *The Beggar Maid*. Almost two decades before *Friend of My Youth* and *Open Secrets*, *The Beggar Maid*'s subtle rejection of any traditional notion of constant identity had already begun to “dismantle the foundations of realist narrative” (50). The fragmented, performative nature of identity in *The Beggar Maid* lying just beneath the surface of Munro's careful and detailed verisimilitude is evidence that Munro's realism has never been transparent or strictly representational. Since even these earlier bodies of work, Munro's stories have dedicated themselves to “undoing the illusion of transparency and advancing in reflexive, opaque, often difficult ways on the unstable world of narrative” (49).

Much of this instability in Munro's narrative world comes from a notion of an inevitably performative nature of identity, one which dominates *The Beggar Maid*. This idea of performance is first introduced in “Royal Beatings,” as a focalized Rose compares her father to “a bad actor, who turns a part grotesque. That is not to say he is pretending, that he is acting, and does not mean it. He is acting and he means it” (18). With this last line, Munro establishes an insoluble link between performance and reality that renders any notion of truth or genuine experience illusory if not strictly impossible.

Later, in the collection's – arguably – titular story, Rose's romance with Patrick receives frequent comparisons to performance. In speaking to Patrick, Rose “felt like a character in a play” (78). In all of their interactions, she “felt a need to be continually playful,” and her approach to sex is “an unpracticed counterfeit of passion” (84). While Rose believes the performance to be one sided, Patrick, however unwittingly, does his own part in constructing Rose's identity: “He looked right through her, through all the distractions she was creating, and loved some obedient image that she herself could not see” (85). Just as the characters confronted with “bathroom noises” in “Royal Beatings” willfully dissociate these moments of unpleasant intimacy from the identity of their creator, Patrick constructs and preserves his own image of Rose's identity. In Munro's world, while identity can be performed, it is also subject to the performative efforts of others. No one individual has complete authority over their own identity. Individuals can manipulate the identities of others just as they can their own.

In this world, performance and reality are so inextricably entangled it becomes impossible even for the characters to discern a genuine moment, or perhaps even for such a thing to exist. Reflecting on her marriage to Patrick, Rose occasionally has brief glimpses of potentially authentic interactions in which “it was as if they were in different though identical-seeming skins, as if there existed a radiantly kind and innocent Rose and Patrick, hardly ever visible, in the shadow of their usual selves” (99). Munro's world is full of such impostors and doppelgangers. From story to story, characters shift in and out of “different though identical seeming skins,” leaving no indication as to which, if any, is the original and which is mere

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costume. Each story features characters with the potential to be entirely distinct from those of the last – their essence is nominal only. Munro does not plot the progress of a few unique, constant characters as a novel would. Each distinct story depicts a separate fragment of a character's fractured identity.

This notion of existence-as-performance takes on another dimension in the final – and also arguably titular – story of the collection, “Who Do You Think You Are?” In this story, Munro illustrates a paradox between the obligatory nature of performance and its disparaging connotation in society through a description of the annual Hanratty parades of Rose's youth:

“One of the most derogatory things that could be said about anyone in Hanratty was that he or she was fond of parading around, but almost everyone in town ... would get a chance to march in public in some organized and approved affair. The only thing was that you must never look as if you were enjoying it; you had to give the impression of being called forth out of preferred obscurity” (195).

Here, Munro illustrates the tacit culture of performance that governs life in Hanratty and, by extension, the narrative world. This performance is further complicated by a simultaneous condemnation of such behavior, thus resulting in a culture dominated by performance within performance. That is to say, while performing, one must also give a performance of rejecting performance. Thus, in Munro's worldview, performance and sincerity are inextricably mixed, and it becomes impossible for anyone to discern genuine thought or behavior from performance even in themselves.

Given this harsh, if paradoxical, condemnation of performance in Hanratty society, much is made of Rose's so-called “theatrics” throughout the collection. While this criticism is often merely the subject of Hanratty gossip, Rose's own anxieties about her performance come to light at the end of the collection's final story. Reflecting on her theater experience, Rose worries that “she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't get and wouldn't get.” These anxieties are not limited to the stage, however, and Rose extends them to her very existence, noting that “everything she had done could sometimes be seen as a mistake” (209). Performance, then, is both intentional and inevitable, both obligatory and regrettable. Thus, in each story of *The Beggar Maid*, the curtain opens on an entirely new scene, perhaps related to but entirely distinct from its predecessor. This fractured, nonlinear approach to narrative structure and identity is reflective of Munro's own later musings on narrative form. In the introduction to her *Selected Stories*, Munro remarks: “A story is not like a road to follow...it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows” (17). In *The Beggar Maid*, Munro

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constructs such a house, each room containing a separate performance populated by new characters who have slipped into different though identical skins.

The error of reading *The Beggar Maid* as a novel is perhaps no where better manifested than in the title of collection itself, or rather, in its retitling. Originally published as *Who Do You Think You Are?* the collection was retitled to *The Beggar Maid* outside of Canada. Though seemingly innocuous, this shift in title completely ignores the collection's complex and crucial discussion of identity, and the ways this image is reflected in narrative form. "The Beggar Maid" refers to an allusion Patrick draws between Rose and the painting of King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid. Thus, the beggar maid is an identity bestowed on Rose by Patrick – one which she herself largely rejects. It is an identity Rose tries on, but only ever in the interest of preserving the integrity of the performance – the "deceits and stratagems" – she acknowledges form the basis of their relationship (84). "The beggar maid" is a no more comprehensive summation of Rose's character than any of the other identities Rose assumes throughout the collection, rendering its choice as the titular story of the collection wildly erroneous.

To read the collection as *The Beggar Maid* is to read it as a novel, a linear progression of a character with one unified, eponymous identity. To read it as *Who Do You Think You Are?* is to understand that such a question can have no answer, and moreover, to recognize that the collection does not attempt to give one. As a title, *Who Do You Think You Are?* gives no illusion of a cohesive narrative, emphasizing rather than obscuring the beauty of fractured identity reflected in the distinct but loosely connected stories of the collection. *The Beggar Maid* attempts to direct its reader down a road to follow. *Who Do You Think You Are?* invites them into the house to explore.

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