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## Deferrals of Domain

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Contemporary Women Novelists and the State

Martine Watson Brownley



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*To Margaret W. Pepperdene*

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# Quotations and Abbreviations

All italics within quotations are those of the author quoted, unless otherwise specified within the text.

Dictionary definitions are from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1988).

AtN	<i>Newsletter of the Margaret Atwood Society</i>
BFT	Collins, <i>Black Feminist Thought</i>
BH	Atwood, <i>Bodily Harm</i>
B & S	Bazin and Seymour, <i>Conversations with Nadine Gordimer</i>
D	Marshall, <i>Daughters</i>
DP	Foucault, <i>Discipline and Punish</i>
FCB	Ferguson, <i>Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy</i>
G & S	Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self"
GI	Drabble, <i>The Gates of Ivory</i>
GT	Butler, <i>Gender Trouble</i>
IR	Irigaray, <i>Irigaray Reader</i>
KR	Kristeva, <i>Kristeva Reader</i>
MAF	S. Wilson, <i>Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics</i>
MP	W. Brown, <i>Manhood and Politics</i>
P/K	Foucault, <i>Power/Knowledge</i>
PMPW	Elshtain, <i>Public Man, Private Woman</i>
SC	Pateman, <i>Sexual Contract</i>
SG	Irigaray, <i>Sexes and Genealogies</i>
SI	W. Brown, <i>States of Injury</i>
SN	Gordimer, <i>A Sport of Nature</i>
"SN & B"	Clingman, "A Sport of Nature and the Boundaries of Fiction"
SS	Zimmerman, <i>Safe Sea of Women</i>
WE	J. Mitchell, <i>Woman's Estate</i>
WLR	J. Mitchell, <i>Women: The Longest Revolution</i>

## Preface: Hobbes's Fish

*Can you draw out Leviathan. . . .  
Will you play with him as with a bird,  
or will you put him on leash for your  
maidens?*

—Job 41: 1, 5 (RSV)

For a long time this study of Margaret Atwood's, Paule Marshall's, Nadine Gordimer's, and Margaret Drabble's representations of relationships between women and the state lumbered along under the working title "Facing Leviathan: Contemporary Women Novelists and the State." Unfortunately, beyond the screen of my word processor that title fared poorly. Blank looks from friends who heard it were discouraging, as were more searching questions from aficionados of Thomas Hobbes. At the very end, unwilling to mislead Hobbesians as well as library catalogers, I reluctantly abandoned "Facing Leviathan."

I briefly resurrect this fragment of textual history because Hobbes's mythical beast sums up so well the kind of state power with which this study is concerned: hierarchical, centralized, and militarized political might.<sup>1</sup> The focus is on what has traditionally been called "high" politics: governmental affairs at the national level and the traditional public sphere in its most limited configuration. Politics, and even state politics, is thus defined in the most restricted conventional sense, and is much more narrowly defined than is usually the case in current feminist and literary discussions. This narrowing is a deliberate strategy in order to focus on various ramifications of the feminist contention that everything is ultimately political, which is itself one aspect of the "impulse to totalize politics and power" that Gerald Graff has noted in contemporary literary criticism (158). My interest is in just what happens with this kind of totalizing move when the politics at issue are state politics.

For the women characters in the novels in this study, the personal is often the political, although not inevitably. The obverse is less often true. The political in the traditional sense in which I use it rarely turns out to be the personal for these characters. Adrienne Rich is correct that at times "even ordinary pronouns become a political problem" ("Notes" 16), but that particular kind of problem is not the focus here. In addition, the focus is on politics as direct action rather than as discursive or symbolic system. The primary concern is not so much with how the state structures the everyday lives of women as with how women can—and cannot—intervene directly in the state, although the two are of course inevitably related.

In few areas of intellectual analysis has the contemporary "methodological shift away from the notion of structure and toward a notion of process" (de Lauretis, *Alice* 105) been clearer than in the works of feminist and other theorists of the modern state. As process rather than product, as the creator as well as the arbiter of interests, the state emerges in the writings of these theorists not as a monolithic institution but as a heterogeneous site of contest. For example, Davina Cooper defines the state as "a contingently articulated, multifaceted phenomena with no fixed form, essence or core" (60–61), while Wendy Brown terms it "a significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of discourses, rules, and practices, cohabiting in limited, tension-ridden, often contradictory relation with one another" (SI 174).<sup>2</sup>

For many reasons the representations of the state by the novelists in this study do not directly reflect this kind of complexity. In part their portrayals are more simplified because they are still working primarily within realistic conventions, and, as Michel Foucault has shown, modern state power, like all power, seeks to mask itself (*History* 86). Brown writes that the state's "power and privilege operate increasingly through disavowal of potency, repudiation of responsibility, and diffusion of sites and operations of control" (SI 194; see also 179). But representations of the state in these novels are not simplified primarily because the states are wily postmodern camouflagers of their own power. In the novels the women characters who become involved in high politics usually do so at so great a remove from the sources of state power that the novelists find it unnecessary to go into detail about the particular governmental forms that these characters confront. Whatever the actual complexity and heterogeneity of contemporary states, the women in the novels are not close enough to observe or understand them.

Thus the novelists' states remain indistinct entities. Theorists have objected to the term "the state" as vague, emphasizing its elision of multiple and sometimes contradictory governmental functions and its



suppression of historical specificity.<sup>3</sup> For theoretical purposes they are correct; welfare and warfare bureaucracies are very different entities, and many diverse state forms have emerged, evolved, and disappeared over the centuries. But for the literary analysis of these novels that is my primary concern, the term "the state" works well enough, because the novelists themselves are vague about specifics of the states they represent.

The novels show various contemporary state forms, from the dissolving welfare state in Great Britain and the Khmer Rouge tyranny in Cambodia, to postcolonial state configurations in Africa and the Caribbean and the ménage of democracy and neoimperialism that marks the United States. Governmental operations in these countries obviously differ in many ways. However, in assessing the women characters' relationships to their respective states, the particular state formation in the novel is usually not the determining factor. For example, while due process of law is available to women in Canada but not on Atwood's Caribbean islands of Ste. Agathe and Ste. Anthony, the same is true for the men in both countries. Whether the given state is capitalist or communist, dictatorial or democratic, in most cases the novels represent the relationships of women to the state as severely limited. Nor are these limitations usually a matter of choice on the women's parts. In most cases they are not engaged in intentional withdrawal,<sup>4</sup> the evasion of state control that Henrietta Moore has seen as a female survival strategy: "Many women try to work around the state rather than to work with it." Moore concludes that "The politics of the modern state are becoming ever more exclusive as they seek to become ever more inclusive" (183). The novelists in this study concur, but not for the same reasons.

Like the state itself, women are constructed and positioned as state subjects very differently in theoretical as compared to novelistic discourses. The novelists' generally dismal presentations of women's relationships to the state are in stark contrast to the more optimistic visions of many contemporary theorists. The characters in the novels seldom behave as most theorists suggest that they could—or should. For example, while many theorists tend to focus on what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe describe as "that infinite intertextuality of emancipatory discourses in which the plurality of the social takes shape" (5), the novelists see mainly repressive and oppressive discourses, with few options for the woman who wants to combat either. A number of theorists urge the construction of new political identities and more egalitarian forms of citizenship<sup>5</sup>; the novelists show that women are barely citizens at all in any meaningful sense. Anna Yeatman is typical of many theorists who have urged women to develop "contestatory political and public spaces . . . in relation to existing systems of governance" (*Postmodern* ix).<sup>6</sup> In contrast,

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the novelists see women as having minimal access to public space and little ability or even will to claim any. Most theorists worry about the possible deradicalization of women who engage in state politics.<sup>7</sup> The novelists suggest that such fears are groundless. They depict women with so few avenues of access to the public world that the women's infrequent and limited participation in politics can change neither them nor the state. Finally, most theorists' accounts focus mainly on horizontal power. They work with power in terms of networks of relations, particularly emphasizing its productive aspects and discursive forms of power. The novelists tend to treat vertical power, direct force exerted from the top down.<sup>8</sup>

It is these kinds of differences of perspective between the theorists and the novelists that this study explores. Katherine Payant has written that the feminism in American mainstream women's fiction is often less radical than that in feminist theory (219). But the most significant points at issue in the differing theoretical and novelistic assessments are not really those concerning political or historical correctness—questions about which group more satisfactorily deploys a particular ideology or which vantage point produces the more accurate reflection of historical reality. Both offer valuable perspectives, and their differences of emphasis, read against each other, can measure the usefulness and validity of each for contemporary women.

For example, the theorists do not entirely ignore contemporary shades of the Leviathan. Brown is typical in admitting that while the state is "an incoherent, multifaceted ensemble of power relations," it is at the same time "a vehicle of massive domination" (SI 174). But the major emphasis of most theorists has not fallen on the domination, while the novelists have consistently represented this kind of raw power as central to women's experience of the state. These differing foci, and the reasons for them, have ramifications for the kinds of relationships that contemporary women are evolving with state politics. Or, to take another example of differing emphases, Varda Burstyn writes that

When we discuss the state as a manifestation of social relations, as a relation of production, as the major organiser of class hegemony, as the site of conflict mediation, we are using conceptual terms which enable us to express real attributes and functions. But these terms, though absolutely necessary, also tend to depersonalise the state, to hide the fact that it is created by, made up of, and maintained by real people. . . . (72)<sup>9</sup>

The novel resists such depersonalization, because a concern with "real people," with the representation of actual human beings as individuals,

traditionally has been a primary characteristic of the genre. Within the context of a novel, even a committed communist discussing the freezing weather on the German-Russian front during World War II can sympathize with the enemy. Doris Lessing's Marie keeps "thinking of those German boys, poor sods, fascists or no fascists, they're human beings" (*Ripple* 250).<sup>10</sup> The levels of the theoretical and novelistic critiques differ, and these differences in perspective can help in evolving more balanced views of the relationships of contemporary women to the state than either genre alone can provide.

Nancy Hewitt has written of the need to "shape a human history that captures both the messy multiplicity of lived experience and the power relations within which those lived experiences are played out" (317). Looking at the differences between "the messy multiplicity of lived experience" that the novelists portray and "the power relations" molding and molded by that multiplicity that the theorists depict can contribute to such a history. To do so, chapter 1 surveys some of the general questions raised by the differing assessments of the relationships between women and the state offered by theorists and novelists. Chapter 2 offers a more specific kind of overview, comparing theoretical and novelistic treatments of three recurring feminist themes, which I have called the Outsider Narrative, the Coalition Narration, and the Salvation Narrative of Politics.

Subsequent chapters provide detailed individual analyses of each of the four novelists. *Bodily Harm*, *Daughters*, *A Sport of Nature*, and *The Gates of Ivory* offer a range of representations of women and the state, and thus each affords opportunities for different critical and theoretical perspectives on these relationships. Because this study centers on literary analysis, it tends to highlight elements of state power that theorists currently occlude, ranging from women's still-minimal access to state politics, to the violence exercised by modern states. At the same time, however, feminist theory also clarifies major elements of many contemporary women's lives about which the novels are ambivalent or misleading, such as romance or the role of sexuality in state politics. In the first two chapters of background material, critique of the theorists dominates; the four chapters on the novelists both deploy and critique theory within specific literary contexts.

Significantly, in one important area the theorists agree with the novelists. Both see the contemporary state as primarily a male preserve, in most cases as uncompromisingly masculine as the Leviathan. Hobbes's introduction to his work explained that man's art created the Leviathan in his own image, as "an Artificiall Man" (9). In this respect little has changed in the centuries since the philosopher from Malmesbury wrote.

Brown points out that "more than any other kind of human activity, *politics* has historically borne an explicitly masculine identity." Despite a footnote admitting war as a possible exception, her text claims politics as "more exclusively limited to men than any other realm of endeavor" and as "more intensely, self-consciously masculine than most other social practices" (MP 4).<sup>11</sup> In this case what is true of politics in general is exponentially true of state politics. In the novels considered here, the scope of male power in the state is huge, whether in the prison cells of a Caribbean dictator, in hearings before U.S. Congressional committees, in the South African intelligence and police services, or in the refugee camps created by Pol Pot's genocide.

Finally, I regretted losing the reference to the Leviathan in my original title for some implied positive reasons as well as the overtly negative ones. If Hobbes produced a nightmare state that excluded women from power in the public sphere, he also clearly revealed the artificiality of that exclusion. Although thoroughly masculine, Hobbes's state is male simply by virtue of tradition, not because of nature or merit. In writing of power over children, he admitted that "whereas some have attributed the Dominion to the Man onely, as being of the more excellent Sex; they misreckon in it. For there is not alwayes that difference of strength, or prudence between the man and the woman, as that the right can be determined without War" (139). In commonwealths, too, Hobbes noted that "for the most part, (but not alwayes) the sentence is in favour of the Father; because for the most part Common-wealths have been erected by the Fathers, not by the Mothers of families" (139-40). The repetition of "for the most part" reflects textually the strain in his assertions. Later in the *Leviathan* Hobbes would claim that fathers were "before the Institution of Common-wealth, absolute Sovereigns in their own Families" (163). But this patriarchalism contradicts his own earlier discussion. As Susan Moller Okin points out, "The mother, with her original sovereignty over both herself and her children, and with no good reason to relinquish either, has disappeared from the story" (198).<sup>12</sup>

Women facing the kind of state power that Hobbes represented thus confront not only an authoritarian political force but also their own potentially equal rights in claiming their share of "Dominion." Contemporary monster states have evolved as they have and functioned as they do in part because of their traditional exclusions of women. For women, then, facing Leviathan involves thinking about how—or whether—to assert their theoretical rights to active political roles in today's states in order to try to leash these contemporary Leviathans for themselves. The alternative is continuing to wait, as the writer in Job puts it, for someone to "put him on leash" for them, a wait that past history suggests will be a long one.

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# I

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## Introduction: Women and Fictions of the State

*[S]ince the dawn of feminism, and certainly before, the political activity of exceptional women, and thus in a certain sense of liberated women, has taken the form of murder, conspiracy and crime.*

—Julia Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, 204

*[W]hen a subject is highly controversial . . . one cannot hope to tell the truth. . . . Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.*

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 4

*One of the most interesting areas annexed by the post-war novel is the area of the woman's novel. . . . Women today, women writers today, are living lives that are very different from those of their nineteenth-century counterparts, more different than the lives of Snow and Amis from the life of Trollope. . . .*

—Margaret Drabble, "Mimesis," 7

*Some people think a woman's novel is anything without politics in it.*

—Margaret Atwood, "Women's Novels," 29



Literature in the western canon offers relatively few stories about women and the state. Moreover, if one identifies in any way with the women characters in these narratives, most of them make unsavory reading. In classical Greek drama women who became embroiled with the state usually died. At Aulis and in Thebes, Iphigenia and Antigone showed what could happen to women when the needs of the state conflicted with the bonds of the family. Only in the comic world of Aristophanes did women move to mold state policy to their wills—and even then they succeeded mainly by relying on their sexuality.

That same sexuality, however, also destroyed the few female rulers of the state who strayed into early literature. Misled by passion, Virgil's Dido and Shakespeare's Cleopatra, capable and canny queens both, perished for love. Their wicked female counterparts who preferred ambition, ruthless rulers manqué like Lady MacBeth, fared no better in their stories. Even a good queen like Hecuba, whose nineteen sons and daughters became in the Trojan world of war an exponential example of women's state service through reproduction, ended as, literally, a dead bitch.

The worlds of epic poetry and classical and Shakespearean drama thus offered a few women of the ruling class narrative space in which to die. The advent of the novel wrought a slight democratic expansion of that space. The new genre allowed women from the middle and lower classes also to suffer at the hands of the state, although there were still not very many of them. Moll Flanders in Newgate, Hester Prynne on the scaffold, and Tess of the D'Urbervilles were typical, but Madame DuFarge showed that the novel was not entirely alien space for women in state service. However, DuFarge is the exception rather than the rule, and even she came to a bad end. Although punishment was the norm when eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists brought women into contact with the state, in contrast to the portrayals in earlier literature, female characters in these novels often survived their encounters with state power. Nevertheless, only in the late twentieth-century novel did the majority of women characters who dealt with state power live and, on occasion, thrive.

This rapid summary obviously reflects schematic oversimplifications. Yet even when one moves beyond canonical novels to include a wider selection, the portrayals of the relationships between women and the state remain predominantly negative until the later twentieth century. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that a major woman novelist emerged who made women and state politics central in a number of her narratives. But Doris Lessing ultimately left such politics behind as a subject, moving into the realm of science fiction. Ever the pioneer, Lessing presaged the proliferation of feminist speculative fiction, particularly utopias and dystopias, among late twentieth-century women writers.<sup>1</sup>