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The Mad Man in the Attic: Playing with Gendered Literary Identity as Object and Muse in Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice* and *The Message to the Planet*.

Within *The Good Apprentice* and *The Message to the Planet*, Iris Murdoch appears to be consciously manipulating both Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist response to Bloom, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in order to challenge both her readership's presuppositions on madness in general, and more specifically how the depiction of madness in literature can be seen to relate to sexuality, religion and gender. Bloom writes that modern authors (specifically male authors) are concerned about their ability to resist the influences of their literary forefathers in order to achieve an original work of their own, with no mention of how a female author might be challenged to create in response to such a male dominated literary past. Bloom relates his theory to Freud's Oedipus complex and the male child's desire to overthrow his father in order to establish his own supremacy. *The Madwoman in the Attic* looks at Bloom's argument from a female viewpoint, with readings of a number of female authors in the nineteenth century examining how it was impossible for them to follow Bloom's theory and identify with the authors who have superseded them in order to respond with their own creations. As a consequence these novelists create heroines whose rebellious desires against the patriarchal domination of their social milieu and their subsequent oppression are enacted if not by themselves then by one or more 'Others' in the texts, such as Jane Eyre's 'Other' Bertha Mason. These works emphasise the numerous depictions of madness and duplicity in various texts as a result of female suppression. Iris Murdoch's novels, however, challenge their argument by providing examples of twentieth century protagonists who are similarly threatened with oppression, yet manipulate the

situations to their advantage, seemingly devoid of the emotional generosity usually associated with women.

The Good Apprentice tells of Edward Baltram, the illegitimate son of the womaniser and surrealist painter Jesse Baltram and his model, Chloe. Edward's mother died sometime prior to the start of the novel and he cannot remember being close to either of his biological parents. He has been brought up by his stepfather Harry Cuno with his step-brother, Stuart. Edward is introduced by Murdoch as 'the prodigal son,' an analogy which is enforced throughout the text by quotation from the biblical parable. Stuart is set up as 'the good son' in opposition to Edward as the rebel. Edward's 'crime' is, however, not a deliberate squandering of his fortunes but an accidental one, when with misguided but good-humoured intentions he gives his unsuspecting friend Mark a drug which leads to Mark's accidental death. Edward's journey through the novel is an attempt to atone for this 'crime' by seeking out his father to proffer absolution. This emphasis on the relation between father and son immediately highlights the importance of origins and parental influence in the novel which links in with Bloom's argument in the *Anxiety of Influence*. Edward's flight from his stepfather to his biological father is essentially a search for his own independent identity, trying to understand his personal history and find a niche for himself unpolluted by the influence of his ancestry. This is easily associated with Bloom's views regarding the male poet:

[W]e never read a poet as poet, but only one poet in another poet, or even into another poet. Our answer is manifold: we deny that there is, was or ever can be a

poet as poet – to a reader. Just as we can never embrace (sexually or otherwise) a single person, but embrace the whole of his or her family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as poet. (95)

However, Edward's journey to liberation proves more of a challenge than originally anticipated when Jesse is eventually found in his remote house, Seegard, apparently mentally unstable and locked in a tower much of the time by Edward's stepmother and two half sisters, Bettina and Ilona.

In discovering his biological father Edward is ultimately trying to understand himself through Jesse and to gain supremacy over the 'wild' elements of his own nature. After the fatal accident with his friend Mark, Edward fears that he has been 'damned'. He explains this as, "I'm marked, I'm branded, people can see it, everyone stares at me in the street. I haven't any real being left [...] I'm ruined and blackened forever" (68). Edward knows that Jesse lived an unconventional, even Dionysian life as "[a] painter, an architect, a sculptor, a socialist *and* a Don Juan" (4), that he separated from Chloe before Edward was born, but despite this he is also a part of himself. As Edward states that he hopes Jesse can absolve him from his 'sins,' it seems likely that he sees Jesse as the personification of his own 'wild' characteristics and can therefore help him to overcome them. In this sense his father's 'insanity' is less of a hindrance to Edward's development than it might originally appear. Edward even seems to see Jesse and himself as one and the same entity and not merely because they are related, "[h]e wandered over to fireplace and looked at the photograph of himself as Jesse" (278).

This shows how Edward identifies himself with his father in an unusual way as the photograph is one of Jesse in his youth, not of Edward, although the resemblance is remarked upon. Edward, then, seems to be craving a scenario in his own life similar to that which Bloom related for the poet, a line of ancestry that he fits into and can be identified with. However, due to the unusual nature of his family situation he is in a sense no different to an orphan as he knew neither of his parents. He could therefore be deemed to fit Gilbert and Gubar's argument more accurately as although he has a lineage, it is not one he can immediately associate himself with. He is therefore isolated in a similar way to the female poet as described below:

Certainly if we acquiesce in the patriarchal Bloomian model, we can be sure that the female poet does not experience the "anxiety of influence" in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. [...] Thus the 'anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary "anxiety of authorship" – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her (48-9).

Gilbert and Gubar progress to describe how female authors create characters that can, by virtue of their being unconventional or 'mad', enact the author's or indeed the

‘virtuous’ main character’s subliminal desires to overturn the established order. They use Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* as an example of this and it is easy to see how Jane’s characterisation can be compared with Edward’s: both grow up without their blood relations, both fear they are inherently ‘bad’ and that they cannot control their ‘wilder’ behaviour, and both are placed in an isolated gothic location with a potentially insane ‘Other’ who simultaneously threatens to ruin them and perhaps save them from their own temptations. If Jane’s ‘Other’ is Bertha, freed by her madness to enact some of Jane’s less acceptable inclinations, then Edward’s is Jesse. Edward desired his aunt Midge but it is Jesse who kisses, Edward wishes he could pursue his half sister Ilona and it is Jesse who conveniently ‘forgets’ they are related and suggests they could marry. Edward is uncomfortable with his step brother’s piety and Jesse shouts at Stuart to be removed from the dining table calling him a “dead man” (292). Jesse is unashamed by his promiscuity despite the unhappiness it has caused, and for Edward this must be an appealing state of mind indeed as his last casual sexual liaison ultimately led to his forgetting his friend Mark and consequently Mark’s drug induced death.

The Message to the Planet deals with a similar problem to *The Good Apprentice*. Again at the centre of the plot is an extraordinary man, Marcus Vallar, in his youth a mathematical genius, but now a recluse with only his daughter Irina for company. Marcus is discovered and brought back into society by his one time friend Alfred Ludens who arrives as an advocate for their mutual acquaintance Pat, a poet who was cursed by Marcus in an argument and then became seriously ill. Marcus appears to revive him just when he has received the last rites and it remains ambiguous whether Pat was saved solely by Marcus’ agency. Irina is convinced her father is now mentally

unstable and she consequently tricks Marcus into moving to Bellmain, a luxury complex for the mentally ill. Marcus is not distressed by this turn of events but Ludens, who believes Marcus is a genius, is horrified.

It is possible that Ludens is less concerned about Marcus's wellbeing and more about his own by association, as Marcus can be interpreted as serving as Ludens' 'Other'. It is Ludens who is determined that Marcus has an important 'message for the planet' long after Marcus has ceased to provide any indication this is possible, and Marcus even tries to convince Ludens of this himself, "You want me to do something 'for the human race'. This is a large saying. What can it mean? As for thinking, I have tried, but I cannot go all the way" (442). Yet Marcus, even at this stage, attracts followers who see him as a healer, something that Ludens shows he is uncomfortable with, perhaps even jealous of, as he shows distaste at playing a part in Marcus' appearances to these people. Unlike Edward, Ludens does not fear the evil in his nature but the lack of daring, brilliance and all the characteristics which accompany success, such as charm. Ludens is told by one of his teachers, "not being a genius, Ludens, you should attempt to do something, not everything" (7) and yet "Ludens was still dissatisfied with his position and with himself...Perhaps it was just that he had always thought himself as capable of 'some great achievement'"(7). He also feels as if he has disappointed his own father. Ludens seeks out Marcus in an attempt to discover not only 'greatness' but also someone who has the daring to reach out to achievement. Where Ludens virtually abandons his academic work to encourage Marcus' and never acts definitively to secure Irina, he sees Marcus as capable of success where he, Ludens, has failed, even to the extent of suspecting Marcus of seducing his own daughter. Luden's places himself in the position of not just pupil and friend but also

son to Marcus, something that is almost certainly behind his interest in marrying Irina and a means to secure the fatherly approval he so keenly seeks.

Marcus however, is not simply perceived as proactive where Ludens is sedentary; he is someone who believes his potential achievements are limitless, possibly because he has a mental illness. During Marcus' sojourn at Bellmain a number of people come to pay homage to him after hearing of his supposed ability to raise people from the dead. Marcus is thus set up as a potential Christ figure, something that is further complicated by both his Jewish ancestry and his preoccupation with the Holocaust.

C.S. Lewis' words in *Mere Christianity* seem especially pertinent here when he says:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse (52).

Marcus never states that he believes himself to be Christ but he does present himself as having unearthly abilities, something that he eventually denounces much to the anger of some of his followers. Shortly after this Marcus dies at Midsummer, possibly he commits suicide, although the cause of death is unclear. His interest in the Holocaust is distastefully alluded to even at his death, as he is found with his head in the gas oven; a detail which gives an indication that even if there was outside

interference in his demise, he did initially intend to kill himself. The doctors at Bellmain assert that it is impossible that he died of gas poisoning, writing a heart complaint on the death certificate and yet confiding later in Ludens that Marcus may have even willed his own death with no extraneous methods. His suicide note seems to support this stating, "I die by my own will. No one is to blame in any way" (471). The literary significance of this ambiguous death will be discussed in greater detail in due course but here it is important to note that Marcus may have deliberately intended a connection between the primary method of mass genocide in World War II and his own death, without explanation or seemingly any consideration for his Jewish daughter, Ludens or indeed the Rabbi who has taken to visiting him. If there was no foul play with the body then surely this shows quite clearly that Marcus' 'message to the planet' had almost certainly been lost in the descent of his mental health.

The image of the madman kept locked away in Iris Murdoch's fiction still seems to be in stark contrast to the image of the madwoman described by Gilbert and Gubar. If the depiction of the madwoman character was to illustrate the oppression of a patriarchal regime and its effects on women's liberation, then there remains a query over Murdoch's choice to depict not just one but two madmen as protagonists within the space of only a few years. Yet perhaps Jesse is not really so very different from the women characters Gilbert and Gubar describe as "if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (53). Gilbert and Gubar describe Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* as driven to madness by Edgar Linton's efforts to 'tame' her behaviour and make her the genteel mother and wife he deems the highest attainment of any woman by Victorian standards. They also consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman's heroine in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, imprisoned for wanting to write and eventually

driven to madness by the lack of it. Bertha Mason has been kept in the attic of Thornfield Hall with only the hostile Grace Poole for companionship for many years prior to Jane's discovery of her. Even without the benefit of Jean Rhys' sympathetic version of her past history in the later written *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is easy to see that perhaps Bertha has not been treated as compassionately as she might have been, and that immuring her in this fashion may have exasperated rather than appeased her complaint. All of these women have been enclosed in one sense or another because they did not behave in a way their husbands considered seemly. Certainly Bertha is aggressive and animal-like in the course of the narrative but this may be a result of the treatment of her rather than her natural inclinations. May Baltram and Irina Vallar are arguably not unlike Edgar Linton or indeed Edward Rochester in this respect. It is impossible to know how much liberty either Marcus or Jesse has and how genuine their illnesses can be deemed. Certainly May shows after Jesse's death her bitterness about his treatment of her when in better health, publishing her journals describing his misogyny, his sexual appetite and his cruelty to the women he slept with. She also tells Edward of Jesse's desire to have her aborted when he discovered Chloe's pregnancy and Chloe's subsequent dismissal, which is unsubstantiated by Jesse himself. Her once brilliant husband, whose eccentric behaviour previously added to his artistic mystique, is described as no longer fashionable; he has bouts of mental illness and has aged. It is hardly surprising that she wants him out of sight so that the legend of him can continue; a legend which not only preserves his past glory but hers by association.

May could also be motivated by money as the family's poverty is obvious, and she saves Jesse's paintings to sell for a greater profit posthumously, even though there is

no evidence that his demise is imminent. She does not hesitate to publish stories of his personal life almost immediately after his death. She tries to promote the image of him being unable to control his sexual interest in women, and although he does say to Edward that he craves ‘a bit of skirt’ even in his last weakness, his wife suggests that he “lusts after” (197) Ilona, which paints a considerably more demonic picture.

Whether this is true or not is not shown clearly in the text. As stated earlier Jesse does suggest that Edward marry Ilona until he is reminded this would be consanguinity but it is also true that he does not always recognise people, the most striking evidence of this being his passionate kissing of Midge when she arrives unexpectedly at his house, mistakenly believing that she is her dead sister and his former mistress, Chloe. There is also only one picture of Ilona done by Jesse and it is not in any sense improper, something that Murdoch must have intended the reader to comprehend as important for the purposes of clearing his name or at least putting May’s accusations into doubt as the other paintings and sketches are considerably more ambiguous and often erotic. Ilona herself also always speaks affectionately of him. Whether Jesse is mad or not, he certainly suffers from May’s feelings of injustice towards him and there remains throughout the text some confusion amongst the other characters over whether it is Jesse that is mad or May.

Arguably Irina acts in a similar fashion, although she is perhaps not as resentful as May, she is similarly calculating, letting Marcus think that she has arranged a new house in the country for him but secretly organising a place for him at Bellmain and it is not clear whether Marcus’ mental health deteriorated from being in this institution, an occurrence which would assist his daughter’s bid for freedom. The textual evidence therefore points to Murdoch asserting that when the *The Good Apprentice*

was published in 1985 and *The Message to the Planet* in 1989 (and perhaps prior to this point in time), men could be oppressed as much as women. That even though society had continued to evolve there was still a dearth of equality between the sexes and that the supposed injustices of the past were still seriously affecting the present.

Murdoch's fictional exploration of the theories of Bloom and Gilbert and Gubar are further examined through her use of Shakespearean tragedies famed for their depictions of madness and parent and child relationships. In particular, Murdoch draws heavily upon *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* in both *The Good Apprentice* and *The Message to the Planet*.

Jesse Baltram is discovered by Edward seemingly drowned in what Anne Rowe describes in *The Visual Arts and the Novels of Iris Murdoch* as an attitude reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite painting of Ophelia by John Everett Millais. Edward first predicts Jesse's death by a vision of the actual event, something that gives the occurrence the same fantasy quality that is evident in both this pre-Raphaelite painting and the romanticised language of *Hamlet's* Gertrude when she reports the mode of Ophelia's drowning.

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples,
[...]
When down the weedy trophies and herself

Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element (5.1.137-151).

Jesse is also described as lying facing upwards in a stream besides willow trees where wild flowers are plentiful, including “water crowfoot” (434) which are the same as Ophelia’s ‘crow-flowers’, there are also “nettles” (306) mentioned by Gertrude above, and numerous other flowers not detailed in Ophelia’s demise but giving the impression that Jesse, like Ophelia is immersed by nature at the point of death. Just as Gertrude describes Ophelia as “a creature native and endued/Unto that element” so Edward considers that the Jesse of his vision has eyes like “those of a sea creature” (307). Similarly Marcus Vallar’s death is discovered by Ludens who has taken up the role of his surrogate or adopted son and again as discussed earlier the events leading to the death are not clear, it could be murder, suicide or indeed a self induced death, willed by the power of the mind. Marcus’ death is on Midsummer Day and although he dies in the cottage at Bellmain, his death is certainly linked to the simultaneous celebrations of the summer solstice and Ludens’ subsequent brief escape into the countryside. Again there is an emphasis on nature at the height of its fertility. The doctor, Marzillian also repeatedly emphasises “there are more things in heaven and earth” (496) when referring to Marcus, which is also a line from *Hamlet* (1.5.168). Both novels therefore draw on this particular tragedy at this key moment in the plot. Ludens and Edward can be seen as pursuing a similar quest to that of Prince

Hamlet, attempting to attain the truth of their 'father's' histories when they are no longer able to seek these answers for themselves. In addition to this in both texts there is a deliberate mystique surrounding the definition of madness and who is really mad, which follows the vagaries surrounding Hamlet's supposed pretence of madness and Ophelia's actual insanity.

However, Jesse's story can be seen to follow that of King Lear's more closely than Hamlet's so it may seem strange that at the point of death he is linked to Ophelia and not with Lear, especially considering he is the father figure of the piece. The Edward and Stuart prodigal son scenario fits in with the Gloucester subplot to Lear, Edward being the illegitimate step-son of Stuart's legitimate father and the actual illegitimate son of Jesse Baltram. There is also a repeated emphasis on 'seeing' and 'blindness' as there is in *King Lear*, with Jesse's home even being called 'Seegard'. In addition to this, Jesse, like Lear, is deemed unfit to rule (in this case his home) anymore and is thus succeeded, partly by devious means, by three women. In this case it is his wife and oldest daughter who are presented as the aggressors or Goneril and Regan characters and as in Lear it is his youngest daughter, Ilona, who is his favourite and loves him best. Marcus too, can be read as a Lear character, his power is also usurped by his daughter who similarly believes him incompetent and perhaps better dead. However, Marcus too dies like Ophelia and Jesse in the height of the summer in a somewhat romanticised and highly ambiguous fashion, more fitting with the female literary history of madness rather than the male. As Carol Thomas Nealy explains in her article on this subject:

In these Shakespeare tragedies, as in the treatises and the medical practises, the representation of madness permits a restoration of normality, a restoration in which madmen and madwomen participate differently. The disguise of Poor Tom is abandoned, Gloucester eschews suicide, and Lear is returned to sanity. The madwomen characters in tragedy, however, are not cured but eliminated. Ophelia is reabsorbed into cultural norms by her narrated drowning and her Christian burial. The report of Lady Macbeth's suicide, abruptly announced in the play's final lines, reduces the supernatural to a simile to vilify and dismiss her (336).

Conversely it is the madmen in Iris Murdoch's fiction who are 'eliminated', but unlike Lady Macbeth there is no certainty of their suicide. Rather, their deaths can be read in a number of ways from accident to murder, which is true of both Ophelia and of Hamlet's father. 'There are more things in heaven and earth' (1.5.168) is a line spoken by Hamlet to Horatio referring to his father's ghost, whose appearance is connected to the revelation of his murder by Claudius. This may indicate that Marcus' death can be deemed murder but it is unclear whether the offender might be the doctors at Bellmain or indeed his daughter Irina who is keen to rid herself of the burden of her one remaining parent in order to obtain her own freedom. Jesse's death could also potentially be interpreted as murder, possibly indirectly by being driven to despair as a result of his family's treatment of him, which links in with Ophelia's madness as a result of Hamlet's behaviour. In one poignant scene Jesse raves, "[w]ill

no one love me, will no one help me, will no one *help* me, will no one come to me?"(292), a sentiment which seems empathetic with Ophelia's plight. Death by drowning, however, was well renowned as a device to portray an enigmatic cause of death as Carol Thomas Nealy asserts regarding *Hamlet*:

Ophelia's suicide is described by Gertrude as accidental ("an envious sliver broke" 4.7.173), passive involuntary, mad. In England in this period, drowning was the most common means of suicide for women and the cause of death that made distinctions between accident and volition most difficult. The play keeps various possibilities in suspension. Gertrude's representation of Ophelia's death neither condemns it on religious grounds nor explicitly condones it on medical/legal grounds. Instead she narrates it as without interpretation as a beautiful "natural" ritual of passage and purification, the mad body's inevitable return to nature (326-7).

Gertrude has her reasons for describing Ophelia's descent in such a romantic fashion even if only to remove the emphasis from a potential suicide. Jesse's actual death (rather than Edward's earlier premonition of it) however, is described as Marcus' is, as a source of horror and yet they do serve to provide a passage to a greater degree of calm and normalcy in the lives of those left behind. If these two father figures can also be deemed as alter egos of the younger men in the same way that Gilbert and

Gubar describe then their deaths can be seen as signalling in a potential new era for those left behind, without the torments of the 'restless' other Marcus and Jesse represent. It also shows a final move into adulthood for both Ludens and Edward and in a final nod to the *Anxiety of Influence* an overcoming of the past to create their own future.

Unlike Gilbert and Gubar's examples of fatal feminine oppression such as that of George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, Murdoch's heroines fare better than her male protagonists. Unlike the nineteenth century heroines, they do this by their own wit and guile, often devoid of sentimentality or emotion. The two most striking examples of this in the novels in question are Irina Valler and Ilona Baltram. Both are immured in an isolated country location as a result of the mental instability of their fathers, both are shown to be slightly 'wild' as a result of their lack of socialization, and although they care for their fathers they are also resentful that their liberty has been compromised. However, neither of these characters follows the examples laid out in *The Madwoman in the Attic* to escape through mental illness or suicide, although their options are depicted as not much more wide ranging than those of their Victorian counterparts. Even though they have both supposedly been born into an age that might support them in their flight, they both suffer from a lack of education that might secure them decent employment, they are not financially independent and they are both held fast by feelings of loyalty and guilt to their families. Both women could have caused or assisted in the deaths of their fathers at some level but equally they might be innocent victims of unfortunate circumstances and parents' who have not put their daughters' liberty before their own. However, unlike the heroines of many of the nineteenth century writers discussed by Gilbert and Gubar they not only strive for

freedom but accomplish it through their own efforts. Irina manipulates her father into a stay at Bellmain, thereby freeing herself from the responsibility of his well being. Although she does not attempt to leave through her own independent agency until after his death, she has secured the means to do so, and once bereaved she immediately abandons Ludens, her father's preferred suitor, and pursues her own choice, Lord Claverden. Irina thereby proves she does not need the blessing or the influence of her male line of ancestry in order to secure her own 'happy ever after', albeit at the expense of the kind though perhaps misguided Ludens. Similarly, Ilona leaves Seegard, she says before her father's death, and chooses to work as a stripper in London, not even returning for her father's funeral. She also therefore breaks her ties with her parents and, consequently, her origins. Ilona even goes as far as explaining to Edward that they may not be brother and sister after all due to her mother's promiscuity, which may also mean that she too might secure a future with her preferred mate. However, they choose not to seek proof of this at present, and she leaves for Paris with another man explaining that he suits her purposes at the moment and thereby declaring the importance of her independence from any familial connection.

These two works therefore provide a distinctly original take on narratives that have become part of the Western literary cultural consciousness, defying the readers' presuppositions and challenging convention. Coming of age and the descent into old age are reconsidered as well as the struggle for supremacy from one generation to the next. These prototypical plot structures are cast in a contemporary light, taking into account the implicit gender bias in the historical representation of this latter narrative. Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* and Gilbert and Gubar's arguments in *The Madwoman*

in the Attic are confronted by Murdoch's late twentieth century interpretation of madness and freedom played out within the 'houses' of her fiction. She paints a world that still suffers from many of the same complications as her Renaissance and nineteenth century literary counterparts but she shows these difficulties in a modern light with modern solutions.

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