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The Trouble with Jerry

Philip Glennie*

In “Gutless” by Bridget Canning, an unnamed narrator undergoes a full gastrectomy and, in losing their¹ stomach, loses the nervous inhibition associated with self-doubt and with a general submissiveness toward the laws of capitalist patriarchy. To put it another way, the narrator’s loss of fear does not lead them to harm those who are vulnerable or marginalized; rather, it leads the narrator to resist certain power relations stemming from an exploitative economic system and a hypermasculine antagonist, relations to which they have previously submitted because they have internalized them in the sensations of the gut.

The narrator’s primary response to the loss of the gut and its inhibiting sensations is to ignore the laws of private property. The narrator has lived much of their life as a disenfranchised employee, but they soon seek out new forms of resistance to capitalist exploitation. When they find it too difficult to survive on post-surgery disability payments, they become a serial

shoplifter and cannot help but marvel at their lack of embodied submission to the normal laws of the marketplace. (No more butterflies in the stomach.) The narrator’s post-gut resistance also targets misogynistic, heteronormative violence, as embodied in the character of the co-worker Max.

Max’s behaviour in this story covers a spectrum of menace running from jocular intimidation to domestic abuse. The most substantial explanation ever given for his aggression is the narrator’s suggestion that Max has a Napoleon complex. Further, we learn that Max’s violence targets women, marginalized men, and animals alike: the latter two figure into the stories of Max’s past, which highlight the pride he takes in “herding faggots” (72) and his history of shaving a cat and feeding it LSD. Being the object of Max’s patriarchal violence, therefore, does not require the narrator to be female.²

Max is not an admirable figure, nor is he likely ever to become one. While texts like Ursula Leguin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*, Angela Carter’s *Nights at the*

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Circus, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* engage the question of whether subjects of hegemonic patriarchy can be reeducated or reformed, these possibilities appear to be off the table for Max. The starkness of this limitation³ makes one wonder how a narrative should deal with a figure like him, and this question is one that the story grapples with from beginning to end.

The narrator ultimately seeks revenge on Max by stealing a mannequin from their place of employment, naming it Jerry, dressing it up in camouflage pants to resemble Max, and burning it in effigy on the hood of Max's prized pickup truck. On the surface, we are witnessing a castration revenge fantasy, both in the sense that the narrator is burning an effigy of Max while ruining his phallic pickup truck and in the sense that the mannequin standing in as Max's double presumably does not have clearly defined genitalia.

Rather than explain why they chose Jerry as their tool of revenge, the narrator equivocates: "Why not? ... Why not indeed?" The narrator in this moment is either unable or unwilling to explain why they find the mannequin such a fitting tool of revenge. Thus, on a surface level, this is a story about a narrator who simply loses their sense of fear and uses the opportunity to take revenge on a disempowering economic system and a masculine antagonist. But does the story travel beyond the thematic boundaries of a revenge fantasy? The

answer to this question circles back to the role of a mannequin named Jerry. To understand this role, we too must circle to the beginning, back to a time before we readers realize that Jerry is a mannequin and not a flesh-and-blood subject. A narrator is speaking inside a car with an utterly passive passenger: Jerry is a captive audience, a figure who, staring blankly through the windshield, listens to the narrator's story in silence. We are presented with a version of masculinity distinct from that of the antagonist Max, who occupies as much space as possible and asserts agency by invoking the constant threat of violence.

At this point, I feel compelled to pause and reflect on my role in writing a response to this story. It is a role I have agreed to take on in co-operation with the editors of this journal, and I have conformed to the journal's responsive, dialogical format in doing so. But to what extent would I better serve this story if I were to emulate Jerry, to become a captive listener and cede the space of these pages entirely to author Bridget Canning? I cannot give any definitive answer to this question, but I do believe in the importance of asking it. And yet I continue on, taking up space in these pages and thereby implying that I, a PhD-educated, cisgendered, white male, should be heard. But should I?

I return to the question of what the narrator achieves by burning the effigy of Jerry on Max's truck. What does it

accomplish beyond a symbolic castration? Does the narrator believe that destroying the truck in such dramatic fashion will alter the way Max acts? If anything, one might expect the act of vandalism to fan the flames of Max's masculine rage, a rage that he is likely to direct at his girlfriend Julia, who helps the narrator destroy his property. After burning Max's truck, the narrator returns to their car and drives away on a dark road, where the path forward is shrouded in uncertainty. One could say the same for the prospect of continuing to live in a world filled with the patriarchal rage that Max embodies.

Why, then, burn a mannequin? I think the story offers a more satisfying answer than the narrator's "Why not?" Jerry is the embodiment of a masculinity rendered fully captive. His only tasks are to bear witness to the narrator's acts of self-expression and self-determination and then to serve as a burning effigy to an apparently irredeemable or irreformable mode of masculinity. To put it another way, Jerry's passivity might offer the best brand of masculinity we can hope for in a world filled with men like Max. For the narrator's part, a continued resistance to capitalist exploitation and patriarchal menace appears to be the only viable way forward, even if that way is only as discernible as the dimly lit road ahead.

I have inserted a break here because this point marked the end of my initial version for this response piece. When I reached this point, I felt that my reading of Jerry and "Gutless" was inadequate, as it lacked any substantial connection to other writers or communities who had reflected on the privilege of the male subject position and the possibility of reconceiving or reforming it. When I sent the initial draft to an editor of this journal, he quickly confirmed this suspicion by asking me to give a better sense of how my reading drew on and was informed by existing work on masculinity, male power, and privilege and how these things might be reconfigured in more ethical ways. As I no longer have any formal connection to the academy and lack many of the resources such a connection would afford, I asked for guidance from my partner, a scholar much more familiar with feminist criticism than myself. She directed me to Alice Jardine and Paul Smith's influential 1984 collection, *Men in Feminism*. It seemed fitting that, when she first opened the book, my partner turned to this passage by Jardine:

Finally, in thinking about this irritation with men's interventions into feminism thus far . . . are we not irritated simply by their professional when not professorial tone so often sandwiched between sharp

critiques of one woman writer after another? By their tendency to descend into pathos and apology as soon as they're threatened? . . . By their general discursive strategies which indicate that they've heard our *demands* but haven't adequately read our work? (58; emphasis in original)

Jardine's last question gives what I think is an accurate description of my response to "Gutless" prior to soliciting additional input. My response offered a general reflection on "the male position" (as though there were only one) and a limited number of ethical considerations attached to it. Further, it was enabled largely by an informal smattering of ideas and phrases I'd picked up from conversations I'd had over the years with people much more informed about feminist writings. My first inclination was to revise my initial draft and incorporate into it the insights gleaned from this further reading; but upon reflection, I've decided to leave the original draft intact to better demonstrate how this further reading expanded on the ideas presented in my initial response.

In my initial response to "Gutless," I suggested that Jerry's silence and stillness showed a total passivity in listening to the narrator's story and in becoming a tool of revenge against Max. I also suggested that this passivity marked what was

potentially "the best brand of masculinity one could hope for" in the world of the story. This statement bears a general, yet possibly helpful relation to what Stephen Heath argues in the opening essay of *Men in Feminism*: "maybe the task of male critics is just to read . . . and learn silence" when encountering feminist writings (29).

To help describe what this silence might entail, Heath looks to Luce Irigaray's concept of admiration. In her 1984 text, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray speaks of admiration as "what has never existed between the sexes. Admiration keeping the two sexes unsubstitutable in the fact of their difference. Maintaining a free and engaging space between them, a possibility of separation and alliance" (qtd. in Heath 20). But is Jerry's position toward the narrator of "Gutless" one of silent admiration, carrying in it the hope for a "better," more ethical male position? Heath sees a problem not with Irigaray's use of this concept but with his own act of appropriating it, writing,

What Irigaray says is true, yet when I quote it, use it, produce it in conclusion, I finish up with a false unity, a fetishizing elision—look, here! For difference and contradiction, I substitute silence, admiration as that; hence that last paragraph, nothing more to say. (31)

Heath even describes this problem of silent admiration in mannequin-like terms, associating it with “what Descartes describes as the body ‘motionless as a statue,’ stopped rigid in single perception” (30). In other words, Heath understands that a stunned, acquiescing silence is not an adequate position to prescribe to any subject looking to become a “good man,” for it offers much too conclusive a solution, an ethical unburdening that might allow the male subject to feel that sheer silence might fulfill his ethical obligation and free him of the need to reflect on the privilege attached to his position, a privilege that in fact contains the very ability to *choose* silence when so many others have silence forced upon them.

In “Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?”, Alice Jardine directly addresses an audience of male subjects who wish to contribute to feminist thought and political action. To help frame their efforts, she asks, “what do feminists want?” She answers,

If you will forgive me my directness, we do not want you to *mimic* us, to become the same as us; we don’t want your pathos or your guilt; and we don’t want your admiration (even if it’s nice to get it once in a while). What we want, I would even say we need, is your *work*. We need you to get down to serious work. And like all serious

work, that involves struggle and pain.” (60; emphasis in original)

Here, Jardine moves away from Heath’s attempt to appropriate Irigarayan admiration to establish a more ethical male subject position. Instead she asks for the “struggle and pain” (60) that comes with serious work. She ends on a relatively hopeful note when she tells her male readers that “you have all your work before you, not behind you. We, as feminists, need your work. . . . We need you as travelling *compagnons* into the twenty-first century” (61; emphasis in original). Jardine’s concept of a traveling companion relates directly to Bridget Canning’s depiction of Jerry as a passenger alongside the narrator. Yet like Heath, Jardine suggests that taking on this position entails a profound willingness on the part of the male subject. It is difficult to argue that such willingness can be found in Jerry.

While Jerry’s emotions are projected onto him by the narrator, they are important for demonstrating the ways in which the narrator imagines him. The dominant affect attributed to Jerry is passivity with an implied touchiness, the latter of which we find in the narrator’s attempts to reassure Jerry with comments like “no offense” (71). Indeed, the narrator imagines a male subject whose position of passivity hints toward Heath’s reading of Irigaray’s admiration. Yet “Gutless” diverges from this line of thought, as it never assumes the male

subject's *willingness* to adopt a subject position in which its agency and privilege is undermined.

It seems fair to say that in "Gutless," the narrator does not (and maybe cannot) imagine a male subject becoming a passive witness to their story in a fully willing way. It is through Jerry's utter blankness that "Gutless" helps convey the ambivalence and even the impossibility of imagining a male subject who is fully reconciled to losing any shred of the agency and privilege usually afforded to it. In a response to Stephen Heath's exhortation to men to exhibit silent admiration for women, Elizabeth Weed notes that

The impossibility of men's (and I would add, women's) relationship to feminism does not imply that we can do nothing, but rather that the contradictions cannot be resolved. Accepting that, the challenge, it seems to me, is to develop political, theoretical strategies, all the while keeping in mind to what extent our radical project is a *utopian* one. (75; emphasis in original)

In other words, Jerry marks an attempt to conceive a different kind of male subject with the knowledge that this attempt will never resolve the contradictions involved in thinking through the privilege attached to male positions. Jerry's passivity and

potential touchiness also raise questions about whether a male subject can ever give up its privilege in a willing way, or whether it needs to have this privilege resisted and subverted by another, more marginalized subject.

In "Gutless," what we never see is a male subject that willingly gives up its hegemonic position. We have only the unwilling or utterly passive loss of this position, initiated through the actions of the narrator. It's important not to forget that, even after he has listened to the narrator's acts of self-expression and self-determination, Jerry's only remaining job is to ruin Max's pickup truck while burning to ashes. What are we to make of his passive sacrifice? Does it suggest that only a total destruction of the male subject can open the possibility of a different future? Is Jerry's burning an acknowledgment of the impossibility of his becoming a participatory travelling companion in the way Jardine suggests?

At this point, I'd like to return to a problem that I didn't properly address in my initial response to "Gutless": the fact that while Jerry might represent Max by wearing camouflage pants, he is not Max's double. Yes, Jerry is burned as an effigy of Max's hegemonic masculinity, but if the two existed in a one-to-one symbolic relationship, the narrator would have presumably named him Max. This lack of symmetry opens a gap between Max and Jerry, as does the ambiguous gendering of the

name Jerry. Thus, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that Jerry is a transformed version of Max, one that is only fulfilled at the same moment that it is consumed in fire. Again, the story here seems to reject any easy notion of a reformed male subject, particularly if the transformation originates within that subject itself. Rather, transformation is proposed as something that can only be imposed on the male subject from without.

Before ending, I'd like to point out at least one more problem with the observations I've made so far: my entire line of inquiry has been premised on the idea that "Gutless" is looking for a *single* "more ethical" position that a male subject might adopt. In her 1998 essay, "Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?", Sandra Harding argues that imagining a male feminist is not a process of working toward a single ideal but a process of "exploring the many diverse kinds of subject positions envisioned in existing feminist (and queer) public agenda theories and their epistemologies from which men can make important contributions to feminist philosophy and social theory" (192). In other words, one should seek to iterate different male subjective positions based on a careful consideration of the historical moments and intersections of power in which they might emerge. This means that my conversation about male subject positions should be informed by the questions being asked

within distinct sites of historically situated struggle.

Within the context of this discussion, I feel that any conclusion must be a non-conclusion, a call for further questioning that resists prescribing a limiting field of action but that still commits to the ongoing goal of seeking out better forms of allying oneself with feminist thought and practice. That said, I believe that Alice Jardine's call for "hard work" might provide a compass for further thought, and so I repeat it here by way of non-conclusion:

What we want, I would even say we need, is your *work*. We need you to get down to serious work. And like all serious work, that involves struggle and pain. (60; emphasis in original)

¹ I use "they" when referring to the narrator, primarily to avoid inscribing the male/female binary that is implicit in alternatives such as "he/she" or "s/he."

² To observe this is not to say the narrator's identity does not matter, that all subjects are affected by patriarchal violence equally and in the same ways. Rather, it is important to note that a host of different power relations and historical considerations would come into play if we were ever to find out more about the narrator's life and identity.

³ I see this limitation as applying not only

to the character Max, but to the story itself, as the narrative does not offer us any other, let alone “better,” version of a masculine subject position.

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