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“Monsters in Suburbia”:

Women’s Bodies, Monstrosity, and Motherhood in *The Mere Wife*

by  
Claire Bonvillain

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores themes of monstrosity in Maria Dahvana Headley's novel *The Mere Wife* in connection with issues of women's bodies and feminism. It analyzes prominent female characters in the novel and the relationships of their bodies to patriarchal authority, showing how and why bodies are deemed monstrous. It discusses the role that motherhood plays in patriarchal society, as well as explores alternatives that the novel offers to this system.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	2
CHAPTER 1: BODILINESS, AGGRESSION, AND POWER.....	14
CHAPTER 2: APPETITE, DESIRE, AND SELF- DENIAL.....	30
CHAPTER 3: PREGNANCY AND BODILY AUTONOMY.....	48
CHAPTER 4: MOTHERS POLICING BODIES.....	57
CONCLUSION.....	71

## Introduction

“The heavy bear who goes with me... the central ton of every place, the hungry beating brutish one... that inescapable animal”: this is how Delmore Schwartz’s poem “The Heavy Bear” imagines the body (Bordo 1). Susan Bordo, a professor of Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Kentucky, known for her work in body studies, begins her book *Unbearable Weight* by quoting this poem. She goes on to explore how it captures women’s conceptions of their bodies under patriarchal systems in the West. According to Bordo, women have been taught to see their bodies as bulky, greedy enemies, a constant threat to their sense of control, their humanity, and their womanhood. Their bodies are a source of “terror” to which they are tethered and cannot escape (4). Maria Dahvana Headley’s 2018 novel *The Mere Wife* uses images of monstrosity to express these sentiments and expose the ways that they are created and reproduced, particularly through the mother-child relationship. The novel also exposes how this model of fear and animosity towards one’s body ultimately leads to a breakdown of bodily control altogether and the emergence of the monstrous body. Finally, *The Mere Wife* proposes how the mother-child relationship can provide a way of looking at the monstrous body with compassion and acceptance.

*The Mere Wife* is a feminist retelling of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, the story of a warrior who bravely defeats a series of monsters to protect human lives and communities. The original story largely concerns the perspective of Beowulf, who is the ideal patriarchal male, aligned with the community and the dominant ideology. Female characters are either on the margins of the story or part of the ranks of its monster figures. Headley’s novel reframes this familiar narrative to focus on the perspective of the outsider, the female, the monstrous--The Other.

Headley's novel tells the story of Dana Mills, a Marine who becomes pregnant while in enemy territory. Leaving the service after being presumed dead, she returns to her family's land only to find that it has been built over to make room for Herot, a wealthy suburb at the foot of a mountain she has known all her life. Dana gives birth to her son, Gren, inside the mountain and raises him there. Gren, who at times is described as a not-fully-human creature, is regarded as a "miracle" by his mother, but she fears that others will see him as a "monster," and so keeps him hidden inside the mountain (42, 39). Her life becomes connected with that of Willa Herot, a housewife whose husband owns the town, when Gren begins going down the mountain and becomes friends with Willa's son, Dylan.

In the original *Beowulf*, a Geat warrior, Beowulf, is summoned to defend a mead hall called Heorot from monstrous attacks. Beowulf fights three monsters throughout the course of the narrative: a creature called Grendel, who attacks Heorot; Grendel's mother, in her attempts to avenge her son; and a dragon, who terrorizes the land Beowulf becomes king of after having a cup stolen from his hoard. The narrative of *Beowulf* is defined by the monsters that he confronts. *The Mere Wife* continues this focus on monstrosity, and mirrors these three encounters. However, it disrupts the simple dichotomy of the monster and hero roles in *Beowulf*, complicating the idea of monstrosity and the boundary between monster and human.

Ben Woolf, Beowulf's counterpart, is called upon to confront three monster figures in the novel. He is first summoned by Willa to Herot Hall with a 911 call to investigate scratches on her window and a claw found in the fibers of her carpet after Gren has entered her home, and for a second time when Dana appears at a party at Willa's house looking for Gren. These moments correspond to Beowulf's first confrontation with Grendel, although Ben does not actually see Gren; only Willa claims to have seen a monster, and no one in Herot believes her. In the original

epic, Grendel kills a warrior in the mead hall when he invades in the night, but in *The Mere Wife*, the only deaths that occur in Herot Hall when Gren visits are when he kills a rabbit as a present for Dylan, and when Dylan swallows the head of his Lego toy king to distract his family's guests so that Gren can escape unseen. In this moment, it is actually Willa who almost kills Dylan, pushing the toy down his throat; Gren saves him by carrying him up the mountain to the mere, where the mysterious creatures of the mere intervene to save him from death.

The second confrontation also mirrors the one in *Beowulf*, as Ben ascends the mountain and dives into the mere in order to confront Dana. Unlike Beowulf, who kills Grendel's mother Ben does not actually kill Dana. When he emerges from the mere with Dylan, he carries Dana's arm, which Gren has cut off because of infection after she is shot escaping Herot. Ben finds the arm in the mountain while retrieving Dylan and takes it as proof that she is dead.

The third monster that Ben confronts is the train inside the mountain, which stands in for the dragon. After Willa and Ben begin to rebuild the train station inside the mountain, destroying and exploiting the remains and heirlooms of Dana's people in the process as well as killing Dylan and Gren, Dana takes control of the train with the Herot residents inside it as Ben stands on the tracks shooting at her. The train hits him as it derails, an act which mirrors the death of both the dragon and the warrior in *Beowulf*.

But, unlike Beowulf, Ben Woolf is not a heroic character. Rather, Headley explores how disturbing such a heroic warrior figure might be as a character in the real world. He is nostalgic for the time he spent killing enemies at war, and he thinks obsessively about "extermination" of monsters such as Dana and Gren, seeing it as the only way of securing his masculinity (250). Many of his heroic deeds for which he is beloved in the community are also invented or distorted by himself, and the truths behind his stories make him appear both murderous and cowardly. So

although he corresponds to the main character of the original source material, Ben Woolf is not the protagonist of Headley's novel. Instead, *The Mere Wife* focuses primarily on the perspectives of the story's female main characters--Dana and Willa--and their sons Gren and Dylan. The narration of the chapters alternates between several characters. Dana narrates some of the chapters in first person; others are narrated in third person with focus on Willa. There are also two collective first person voices: a voice which narrates the experience of the mothers of Herot, and the voice of the mountain, the mere within it, and all of its creatures, which describes the events in Herot below as well as the activities of Gren and Dylan. Other than a few chapters which follow Ben Woolf, most of the novel is told through either a female or a nonhuman perspective--a monster's perspective.

To be monstrous means that they have failed to be properly human. Monsters, as framed in this novel, break the rules and social norms that govern human behavior. This means they also pose a threat to hegemonic systems of power such as patriarchy, which rely on humans to comply with these regulations. Transgressive figures offer an alternative way of being, which is dangerous to social systems of authority. Thus, these characters must thus be punished by rejection from the community and from being identified as human. The original *Beowulf* supports this reading of monstrosity. The story's first monster, Grendel, is part of the race of the biblical figure Cain, a human rejected from his human society after killing his brother (*Beowulf* line 107). Grendel's monstrosity, then, originates from a transgressive act and subsequent outcasting. Grendel transgresses against society and its values by living apart from the community of the Danes, alienating himself from the social world. He is monstrous because he invades Heorot, but also because he is an outsider, an other . Likewise, Grendel's mother is

considered monstrous because she is a female warrior, and this is not the accepted role for women to play in her society (Alfano 2).

In *The Mere Wife*, however, the monster figures, Dana and Gren, are revealed to be loving and sympathetic characters who are rejected, misunderstood, and wronged by the community of Herot. The novel characterizes monstrosity as derived from otherness and transgression rather than evil; as such, it is not necessarily a bad thing. These monstrous characters are not ultimately defeated by the heroes either, although *The Mere Wife* does end with their death. In the novel's last chapter, Dana describes being reunited in death with her ancestors, her son, Dylan, and other figures from her memories of her life, including former enemies like the people of Herot.

Ultimately, *The Mere Wife* reveals the patriarchy as a monstrous system, which forces female bodies to obey certain standards and restrictions for the benefit of men, the community, and the reproduction of the patriarchal system. The patriarchy requires women, like Willa and the mothers of Herot, to control their bodies as well as the bodies of others. It teaches them that relinquishing control over their bodies will make monsters of them. These women are meant to be the community that Ben Woolf is protecting from transgression, but Headley demonstrates that they often are guilty of it themselves. These women in the novel are frequently compared to, or imagine themselves, as beasts, wolves, dragons; they are described as transforming in and out of monstrous states.

Reading *The Mere Wife*, I noticed that Willa is constantly appraising and correcting her body in the novel, imagining how it must look to others and altering it so that she may appear perfect: plucking single hairs from her legs, applying makeup, stopping herself from eating. She must hide her inner thoughts and feelings and suppress her impulses in order to be the perfect

wife, mother, daughter and hostess. She takes stock constantly of whether she is “failing” at these roles, and when she does so, or imagines doing so, she thinks of these failures in images of monstrosity (55). I also noticed that these images of monstrosity are tied to behaviors, such as aggression, size, hunger, hair, carnivorousness, and animality, that women are not allowed to enact. I wondered what the novel was expressing about the relationship of female bodies to power, and how the idea of monstrosity plays into this relationship.

I realized that the bodies of the women in Herot are not their own. Their bodies exist for the use of others: men, children, the community and its patriarchal expectations of femininity. These others, and their needs and desires, have more rights over women’s bodies than they themselves do. The role of womanhood in Herot, and in patriarchal society, is constructed so that women are only allowed to use their bodies in ways that are useful for those who control them. Headley illustrates that what makes women monstrous in Herot is breaking the rules of womanhood. Images of monstrosity in the novel are tied to actions, such as aggression, size, hunger, hair, carnivorousness, and animality, that women are not allowed to perform. Women who are transgressive against these rules are in danger of being deemed monstrous, stripped of their womanhood and humanity and cast out from the community.

As I considered how these ideas work in *The Mere Wife*, my research led me to Susan Bordo’s book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Bordo’s book explores the way women’s bodies are expected to behave in patriarchal culture, how these expectations are expressed in Western society, from the law to popular culture, and the effects that they have on the way that women think and act in the real world. Much of Bordo’s theory was relevant to my observations regarding women’s bodies in *The Mere Wife*.

One concept from *Unbearable Weight* that is important in Headley's novel is the idea of the "bodily eruption" (189). Bordo uses this term in the chapter "Reading the Slender Body," to refer to any "excess bulge, fat, or flab" on female bodies, which women are told they must eradicate (189). Here, she argues that it is not the goal of women simply to lose weight, but to suppress any appearance of fat on their bodies. However, the term applies to any aspect of the body that is "unsightly," or that displays "uncontained desire," "hunger," or the animal, the "uncontrollable self" (189). Any characteristic of women's bodies which characterize them as bodies in their own right, rather than servants of the patriarchy, is a bodily eruption. Bordo describes how women must keep their bodies "bolted down" within "firm bodily margins" in order to avoid being guilty of such an eruption (190-191). They must be contained and controlled to avoid transgressing the boundaries of bodily behavior.

Many of Bordo's observations in the chapter "Hunger as Ideology" were also instrumental to my understanding of desire, food, and sex in *The Mere Wife*. In this chapter, Bordo uses advertisements for food, diet products, and other related commodities to examine the ways in which women are allowed to eat and desire food in Western society. Bordo argues that regulating women's hunger is one example of how patriarchal society attempts to regulate female desire; the need for food is one of the most basic and tangible ways in which desire can be controlled (171). Thus, the way female consumption of food works in patriarchal society has bearing on other forms of desire, such as sexual desire. As Bordo explains in this chapter, hunger and sexual appetite are conflated and used as metaphors for each other in the popular imagination.

The restrictions governing eating and hunger for women that Bordo draws from the chapter's examples are useful in understanding the way that food functions for Willa and the

other Herot wives in *The Mere Wife*. Bordo demonstrates, using the advertisements, how women's position in the role of serving and feeding, perceived as "natural" precludes them from being allowed to consume food for their own satiation (118). They are permitted to consume only as little as possible, never to satisfaction or excess. They are also compelled to feel guilt, rather than pleasure, upon succumbing to desires. Bordo also uses advertising evidence to show that women are not supposed to experience, let alone display, hunger, despite being required to deny themselves food. They are meant to maintain an indifferent, "cool" attitude towards food (100). The book points out how acknowledging women's hunger would require the patriarchy to admit that its women are required to starve themselves and to recognize disordered eating as a cultural phenomenon, and a common one at that, in addition to a pathological one.

*Unbearable Weight* also contains important ideas about the way motherhood affects women's bodies in patriarchal society. The chapter "Are Mothers Persons? Reproductive Rights and the Politics of Subject-ivity" explores the way that pregnant bodies are understood in the United States legal system. She argues that pregnant women are legally conceived of as vessels, "fetal containers," in that the child is perceived as the dominant subject within the pregnant body (77). The child's right to life overrides the mother's right to control over her body, a right which is considered unalienable in other cases. In the case of pregnancy, mothers' desires are often dismissed as emotional or selfish. In my exploration of *The Mere Wife*, I extend the supremacy of the child's subjectivity and desires over the mother's in the eyes of the patriarchy from the period of pregnancy to the entirety of motherhood. I argue that children are perceived as owning mothers' bodies beyond the moment of birth.

Bordo's book was also useful in understanding the ways that regulations on women's bodies are enforced by the patriarchy. In the chapter "The Body and the Reproduction of

Femininity,” Bordo uses Michel Foucault’s theory as a basis for understanding the mechanics of the oppression of women’s bodies. She agrees with Foucault that power is not necessarily held by one group and imposed on another; rather, normalized social practices work to keep some groups dominant over others. In other words, oppression is reproduced “from below,” in the bodies of the oppressed, rather than inflicted from above (212). Bordo applies this theory to her writing on women’s bodies. She explains that women learn to discipline and contain their own bodies through everyday practices such as “diet, makeup, and dress” (166). Women learn, through being socialized and expected to perform these practices, that their bodies are incomplete without them. Mothers, as the first teachers of daily practices, self-maintenance, and femininity, are enacting patriarchal oppression on their daughters, teaching them that sensation of “insufficiency” which they must combat by disciplining their bodies (166). Mothers are an important way by which oppression is reproduced “from below”: they teach their daughters to control their bodies as the mothers themselves have been taught to control them.

In my discussion of *The Mere Wife*, I focus on how Willa’s character expresses the relationship between women’s bodies and power with regards to monstrosity in the novel. In patriarchal societies like Herot, the mere existence of women’s bodies, outside of the service of others and fulfilling proper womanly roles, is disavowed by the patriarchy and considered monstrous. Women’s bodies are not permitted to behave like normal human bodies or to take up space. However, such constraints mean that women must think about their bodies constantly, making their bodies huge and monstrous in their own imaginations. Women in Herot are also not permitted to hold any physical or political power or to display any kind of aggression or anger which might threaten men as the combative powers of the community; to do so would make them monsters. Compartmentalizing strength and aggression, however, only serves to create

women who are monstrously powerful in secret, and even more so when their self-restraint is released, as Willa's is near the end of the novel.

Women like Willa are also required to contain their desires, either for sexual pleasure or for food, because they are meant to be completely oriented towards the needs of others rather than their own in order to better serve their men, children, and communities. They should be completely focused on satisfying others and are not allowed to acknowledge even experiencing their own desires, much less allowed to indulge them. However, denying their desires makes them ultimately stronger, creating monstrous hungers which are expressed through Willa's imagination. Ultimately, she loses control of these hungers and they begin to manifest themselves in her actions as well as her fantasies.

Pregnancy is an exception to the usual restraints on women's bodiliness and desire; it is allowed to be so because it serves a necessary function to the patriarchy. However, pregnant bodies can still be rendered monstrous in societies such as Herot. Although women are expected to be more prone to bodily eruptions and uncontrolled desires during pregnancy, they still experience shame and disgust about their bodies' behaviors, having been taught that they are monstrous. The experience of pregnancy can also be distressing for women like Willa because their sense of self and subjectivity is intruded upon and even eclipsed by their children. They are also bound to lose the part of their selves that they have nurtured as they must take on the motherhood responsibility of exerting patriarchal power over their children, policing their bodies into proper form.

Because women in Herot are not allowed to establish their bodies as the locations of power, they must hold power indirectly. They use men as figureheads to accomplish their own plans, turn the public arena into the private by inviting the community into their homes, and

shape the community by policing the bodies of their children as mothers. They are responsible for regulating the behaviors of their children on behalf of the patriarchy, eradicating monstrous behavior whenever possible, and otherwise concealing it. If these efforts fail, they must reject their children in order to remain innocent of monstrosity themselves. Mothers must do these things in order to teach their children how to be proper human beings, keeping the line between the abject and subject intact. They are the guardians of this divide, meaning that when mothers are monstrous, the whole boundary between human and monster collapses.

*The Mere Wife* deconstructs this vision of the relationship between women's bodies, power, and monstrosity, and the place of the mother in it, in order to ultimately offer an alternative vision of motherhood. This alternate construction of the role of mothers is demonstrated in the relationship between Dana and Gren, and is one in which monstrosity is mutually accepted in the mother-child relationship. Dana sees her child's monstrosities as wonders, and stands with them against the world rather than rejecting them. This relationship demonstrates that monstrosity does not preclude community, but instead is a means of creating community.

## Chapter 1: Bodiliness, Aggression and Power

### Women's Bodies and the Necessity of Containment

The night before the renovated train station inside the mountain is to be revealed, Willa has a dream of being underwater, surrounded by other women, swimming. She sees them transform into white deer, then back into women, and then into wolves. With this final transformation, she becomes aware of her own body, realizing that she, too, is a wolf as she feels

her “tail lashing” in the water (259). They are then returned to women, but their wolflike characteristics, their “teeth and tail and claws,” remain part of them as they swim upwards together (259).

In this dream, Willa imagines different ways of understanding women’s bodies. In visualizing them as deer, she imagines women’s bodies as they are seen under patriarchy: as prey. Her body is “a dream dreamed by someone else,” as she describes it later in the chapter, existing to be consumed by others (264). Imagining women as wolves sees a different potential in their bodies: the potential for aggression, consumption, and power. Both images, moreover, allow Willa to see her body for what it is: an animal. She experiences her body freely, feeling her “tail lashing” without judgment, as she is not allowed to in her daily life. In reality, Willa cannot be a woman and still retain her “teeth, tail, and claws”; embracing her bodiliness and animality in Herot would mark her as a monstrous creature, wolf rather than woman.

The women of Herot are not allowed to have bodies. The ideal female body is a doll for male gratification and pleasure, and a machine that produces children and nurtures men, children and communities. The bodiliness of women, outside of the functions that they serve to their men, children, and communities, is a transgression against patriarchy. Any feature or behavior of women’s bodies that does not meet these needs must be eradicated. Susanne Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* refers to these features as “bodily eruptions”: resurgences of the bodily which are unsightly and unacceptable to the patriarchy, and thus must be tamped down (189). Such eruptions represent the abject, defined by Barbara Creed’s “Horror and the Monstrous-feminine” as “that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ in a patriarchal society (68). Much of the abject includes “biological bodily functions,” along with other behaviors which threaten civilized societies such as Herot because they mark humans as bodily, animal, monstrous. Essentially,

women's bodies are not allowed to be bodies (Creed 69). Ideally, they would fold up and disappear when not being put to work in the service of their owners under the patriarchy; in practice, this means that their bodily eruptions must be concealed from the knowledge of men.

Willa's body must be smoothed over to control such eruptions, with every lump or wrinkle concealed, "tugged" into Spanx that "squeezes every inch of her" to be fit to appear to the community (94, 132). The bodily eruptions of lumpiness, wrinkles, cellulite, stretch marks, or even visible body hair are a transgression for women in Herot. Her second husband Roger, a cosmetic surgeon, makes his fortune from eradicating such flaws of female bodiliness; Willa imagines him as a "gardener trimming labial hedges" (41).

Men's bodies in Herot are not required to be controlled in the same way. Although Ben, Willa's third husband and police chief of Herot, obsessively works to keep his body in perfect shape, he considers his discipline to set him apart from "other men."; he is not working to live up to the expectations of the men of Herot (66). His standards for keeping his body controlled are certainly not because Willa has a right to his body. When Willa notices "a tiny pad of fat on his belly," she keeps the information to herself (225). Ben's body, for Willa, is allowed to be fallible in the way that bodies inevitably are; he is not bound to the same regulations that she is. Ben may allow himself some negligence in waxing his entire body, acknowledging that "mammals are not by nature smooth" (162). Willa's body, on the other hand, is not regarded as a "mammal," or allowed to behave as one.

Much of the trouble with women's bodies has to do with their leakiness. This is a facet of bodiliness that most people prefer to ignore: the fact that bodies are open, permeable, with fluids and other substances moving in and out, rather than closed circuits. This feature of bodiliness, considered improper generally, becomes a taboo with respect to women's bodies. Women must

keep constant control over their bodies in order to maintain “firm bodily margins,” as termed by Bordo (191). Just as women’s bodies are supposed to survive without taking food in, they are meant to remain closed to anything bodily which might exit them. They should neatly accept the proper phallus, produce children and the milk by which they are fed, and remain otherwise sterile, self-contained robots rather than real, messy bodies.

In one of Willa’s most vulnerable memories, after her mother “rescues” her from her first marriage and takes her to have an abortion, Willa is driven home with numerous paper towels stuffed into her panties (22). She compares herself to a “Jell-O mold, unset” and in danger of a transgressive spill (23). Here, we see the premium placed on keeping women’s bodies contained; Willa recognizes her potential to leak blood as “dangerous” (23). The containment of her bodiliness extends beyond the physical, as Willa’s mother warns her not to tell her father about the abortion because “it’ll only disgust him” (22).

The imperative of slenderness is a cardinal rule for the women of Herot and for patriarchy in general. This is partially because women’s bodies are mainly valued as objects of male desire; they only have value if they adhere to the standards that make them proper objects of desire for men. However, fatness poses a more precise threat to the subjection of women’s bodies in the service of men and patriarchy. Women’s bodies, because they exist only for others, are supposed to take up as little space as possible. Physically, they should only take up as much space as needed to serve men, by being proper objects of desire and physical pleasure and by nurturing the household and community. Any extra space taken up by a woman’s body is superfluous, and thus not allowed. If a part of her body does not make her better fit the model of the ideal woman, why should it exist? This is why it is so important for Willa to have “no fat... anywhere” on her body (91). Even an inch of matter that does not exist to serve some male need

is unacceptable. Even Willa's height is potentially threatening to Roger, so much that she "can't wear heels;" Willa taking up a certain amount of space becomes intimidating to him, and she must shrink herself in order to put him at ease (110).

Women's bodies are also not allowed to exist in their imaginations. The ideal woman has a total lack of body consciousness: her body only exists in the service of others. As explained by Jia Tolentino in her essay "Athleisure, Barre and Kale: The Tyranny of the Ideal Woman," a woman is meant to be indifferent to the way her body looks, to project effortless in the maintenance of her body. However, the illusion of effortless masks a constant bodily awareness, as the necessity for women to limit the corporeality of their bodies means that they must live "a life centered on the body" and its maintenance (Bordo 17). For a woman in Herot, keeping her body narrowly confined means thinking about her body constantly, developing a hyper-consciousness of its appearance, its movements, its size.

Willa thinks about her body constantly in *The Mere Wife*. She is always taking stock of her appearance, measuring whether she is "thinner and more beautiful than she was a week ago, more perfect" (133). Willa is the definition of self-consciousness, perpetually thinking of new metaphors with which to appraise her body: she is "a saintly relic" (133); she is made of "marble," then "obsidian" (133); she is a "pearl" (174); her legs are "long and pink, like fronds" (43). Even in the surreal moments after Dylan's kidnapping when she is in shock, the first thing she notices is how her body spills off the sides of the stretcher. She must constantly be on guard against her unruly body; it becomes the "central torment" of her life, as it must be for many women in Herot (167).

This forced bodily consciousness manifests itself as monstrosity: the unruly aspects of women's bodies become monsters they must control. Their bodies are made larger and more

corporeal because they must loom so large in the minds of women. Although she is physically thin, Willa sees her body as a monster, a “dinosaur” (85). To her, her body exists as unforgivably large, as well as a creature she must control lest it “thunder across Herot Hall all teeth, claws, and irresponsibility” (85). However, such monstrous corporeality is a tempting release of control to Willa, something she wishes for even as she suppresses it. At the end of the novel, Willa relinquishes control over her unruly body and its eruptions. She sees herself as a monster, “flying out of her house and over the land”; this image calls to the reader’s mind the hugeness of a dragon, the final monster of the original *Beowulf*, identifying Willa with its monstrous enormity (283).

### Controlling Female Aggression and Authority

One aspect of bodiliness which women are required to control is the ability of their bodies to contain power, embody aggression, or engage in combat. They are required to maintain the appearance of their bodies’ docility at all times, appearing completely gentle, placid, and powerless. This means suppressing any eruptions of anger or aggression when they occur in order to perform as the ideal woman.

In one such scene, when Willa Herot emerges from her house on Christmas morning, she is hit by a snowball by Roger and her son Dylan. She is already on edge in this moment; Willa’s mother Diane and her friends have just left Willa’s house, where she called them to investigate scratch marks she has found on her windows. Willa is panicked about the scratches, her sense of security in her gated community violated. However, her fears are belittled by the mothers of Herot as well as by her husband, who has attributed the scratches to Dylan, and blames Willa for allowing him to access a knife. Upon being called to her home, Diane and the other mothers

dismiss Willa's concerns and use the visit as an opportunity to scrutinize and criticize her performance as a wife. They leave her feeling both afraid of a loose animal and stupid for asking them for help. She is also upset by finding the heads of her gingerbread men "neatly bitten off," in what she presumes is a prank by Roger and Dylan (57). Going outside to speak with them, she is hit by snowballs, "hard," once in the back, and once in her face (57). Willa views this seemingly innocuous moment as an act of shared masculinity in violence against women, as her son and husband laugh at her. She sees her husband and son as "the men," or immature "boys," of the world, mobilized to hurt and humiliate her (57). Willa recognizes this moment as Roger teaching his son to do violence against women, who will remain smiling and compliant.

The harrowed Willa experiences a very physically aggressive reaction: she tenses up, "clenching in turn her teeth, her vagina, her fists" (57). The clenching of her teeth and vagina draws attention to what is instinctual, bodily, animal, in her anger; this, combined with the clenching of her fists, links female anger with physicality and combat. She must suppress these bodily responses, however, because her body is not allowed to display any kind of physical force, aggression, or potential for waging any type of war. Thus, she "tries to keep smiling" and offers them coffee, in order to continue fulfilling the role of docile housewife who has no capacity for anger or for battle (57). Here, Willa suppresses her anger and aggression in order to preserve her image as a dutiful, docile wife and mother. It is imperative that she appear cheerfully servile and submissive in response to whatever is done to her, so that she might not commit the sin of appearing even "grumpy" to her husband (57). Her clenched teeth and fists, as well as her thoughts of knives and swords, must be swallowed.

In societies like Herot, the display of female power and aggression is an act which deeply threatens the sovereignty of men and patriarchal society over women's bodies. It is important

that the men of Herot are allowed to view their women as living in “pampered uselessness,” as the docility and powerlessness expected of women is termed by Keridiana Chez’s essay “‘You Can’t Trust Wolves No More Nor Women’: Canines, Women, and Deceptive Docility in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*” (82). When Herot’s women need to cultivate power, it must be carefully hidden and controlled, such that “everyone thinks all [they’ve] been doing, for thirty years, is planting award winning begonias” (268). The illusion of “pampered uselessness” is important to keep them in the good graces of the men who are authorities under patriarchy.

With this illusion in place, a man in Herot’s patriarchal world is consistently able to count himself as more powerful than all women, assuring himself, as Ben Woolf does when preparing to face Dana, that “he’s stronger than ever. He’s strong enough to take her” (163). It is important that men see themselves as more powerful, so that their patriarchal authority is not questioned. They must be powerful enough, both physically and publically, to overpower any woman who rebels against their authority. It is even more important, however, that they believe the women whose bodies they own, their wives and community, need their protection. Physical prowess and the ability to command public authority are not allowed to be located in women’s bodies because the responsibility of war-making, both physically and within the community, belongs to men, according to strict gender dynamics. According to the chapter “Mother of Battles: Volumnia and her Son in *Coriolanus*” in Coppelia Kahn’s *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*, these gender dynamics locate the combative and public sphere as male-dominated, while women are confined to the docile domestic sphere (Kahn 145).

A powerful woman would threaten the illusion that men are superior, as well as the justification that men’s combativeness is well-meant and necessary for keeping their fragile women safe. When women use their bodies to command power of any nature outside of the

peaceful and domestic, they threaten the dominance of men as the sole holders of war-making power. In order for men such as Ben, whose sense of identity is tied to being a soldier, to believe that they are useful and noble in making war, they must continue to believe that “women... have no rules” and are allowed to “do as they please” because they are protected by masculine power (250). Thus, female displays of aggressiveness, physical power, and authority, by locating war-making power within the female body, constitute a betrayal of women’s bodies against their male owners: they displace the men in their communities as authorities and combative protectors, as well as call into question the gender roles which patriarchy relies on.

Power in the hands of a mother is especially threatening to patriarchal notions of power. In the rare moments when a woman is allowed to be powerful under a patriarchal system, it is by virtue of perceived virginity. As explained by Paul Acker’s “Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*,” because a virginal woman is not considered to be in full possession of female sexuality, she can be masculinized -often by being symbolically given a phallus in the form of a weapon- and is thus allowed to hold power (707). Coppelia Kahn cites Queen Elizabeth and other “maiden warriors” as examples of this: a woman can take on the role either of “drawing the bow” or “nursing the baby,” but not both (145). Motherhood, however, exempts one from the possibility of being made a maiden warrior and acceptably holding power without threatening masculine dominance. Mothers, save for the occasional miraculous exception, cannot be masculinized as maiden warriors: they are undoubtedly sexual beings, not virgins, and are obviously female. The idea of the feminine as a source of power despite its non-maleness invokes the “threat of the potency of non-phallic... sexuality,” as termed by Karen Hollinger’s “The Monster as Woman: Two Generations of Cat People,” jeopardizing the status of the phallic subject as the sole locus of power (40). Thus, mothers cannot be allowed to be figures of

authority, aggression, or war without becoming a threat to patriarchal power, as motherhood makes them irredeemably woman.

Thus, women and especially mothers in Herot must appear completely docile, meek, and powerless. They must play the part of idle, helpless housewives, who need men to protect and to lead them, and who never feel inclined to anger or aggression. Because their bodies are owned by men, women are not allowed to threaten their authority by using their bodies to display power. To do so would be to steal their bodies out from under their owners, illicitly claiming them for themselves. This is true despite the fact that fulfilling the ideal of patriarchal womanhood actually does require the cultivation of power. In order to achieve the slender body that is the imperative for Herot wives, exercise is often a required pastime; Willa describes the mothers of Herot as having “arms made muscular by boxing. Three have become karate black belts out of boredom, and the rest train on the Pilates reformer daily.” (54) However, although the women of Herot must work to achieve and maintain the bodies that the patriarchal system that owns their bodies demands from them, the slenderness of their bodies must be projected as effortless: the physical prowess of women cannot be recognized as trained. Though because of the work it takes to maintain bodily expectations their bodies are trained “to fight with enemies [they] haven’t met yet,” and they spend their time “battling against punching bags,” it is important that the men are able to view their bodies as untrained, fragile and dainty as well as slender (94). Thus, though the women of Herot clearly understand their athletic activity as training for the battles of womanhood, they must be framed publicly as “doing nothing,” as perpetually engaged in leisure, in order to appear delicate and undisciplined enough not to threaten the dominance of men. The women of Herot are forced to simply watch “men at work” while they appear idle (206).

Interestingly, though, this illusion of perpetual leisure and effortlessly toned bodies is achieved by tightly regimented “pre-emptive control,” through methods such as intense exercise regimens, as discussed by Jia Tolentino in her essay “Athleisure, Barre and Kale: The Tyranny of the Ideal Woman.” Many modern women’s workout classes, such as barre, involve short periods of “manic, ritualized activity,” designed to enable the maintenance of the idealized female body under highly compartmentalized conditions (Tolentino). This “optimization” of the time it takes to maintain this ideal allows women to appear carefree and their bodies to appear effortless, especially as these classes are marketed and perceived by men as “leisure” rather than disciplined bodily training (Tolentino). By pointing out the physical strength that the women of Herot have gained from such highly ritualized women’s workout classes such as Pilates and boxing, and by pairing them with images of battle, the novel points out the physical work and discipline required of women to keep their bodies up to the standards of those it belongs to, and the intensified effort required to compartmentalize their bodily conditioning in order to project effortlessness.

The premium placed on natural, effortless performance of bodily ideals for women is especially true today. Modern society, and particularly modern womanhood, is invested in the appearance of nonconformity. The “ecosystem” of Western culture has been altered by the feminist movement (Tolentino). However, Jia Tolentino’s essay argues that much of mainstream culture has become invested in the aesthetic of feminism and empowerment while still reinforcing conformity to a patriarchal ideal of femininity. The ideal woman has simply to adapt in order to “survive” in this ecosystem, which only “pretends to resist her,” through feminist messages that are only surface-level (Tolentino). To admit that one expends effort towards conforming to ideals is shameful and “unfeminist,” so it has to be done in secret.

This shift towards the illusion of nonconformity in modern life is apparent in *The Mere Wife*. As Willa and Ben gain control of Herot, eight years after her narrative's beginning, Willa makes changes to the aesthetics of the suburb; the cookie-cutter, "perfectly plotted hedges" are replaced with "wild roses, to suggest romance," and "the white picket fences are replaced with sustainable wood, brass fittings, and the front doors are painted red" (223). The importance of good looks appearing "natural" also presents itself at the birth of Willa's twins, during which she wears "makeup that looks like it isn't" for pictures (195). In the same vein, women must maintain the illusion of effortless beauty for the way that their bodies look. Performing docility in the form of physical weakness for the men, communities, and social institutions that own their bodies means hyper-awareness and control of one's body and how it is perceived at all times. We see this in Willa's awareness that she "lets [Ben] crumple her" by physically overpowering her during sex in order to feel masculine, as well as how she alters her makeup to make herself appear tired and harrowed after Dylan's death, performing weakness in the form of grief for the eyes of the community (226).

Women actually have no rest time during which they are allowed to relinquish control over their bodies and stop putting energy towards improving their bodies. Because they are not recognized as putting "work" into shaping their bodies, they are not able to have "earned" leisure time. For men, life can be divided between work and play, time spent improving oneself and time spent resting; because women's work towards improving their bodies goes unacknowledged, their bodies are never given rest. Jia Tolentino's essay describes this problem as the issue of the athleisure "lifestyle" for women: "lifestyle" constitutes a blending of work, which includes working out, and leisure, such that one is in a constant state of "work" because work is perceived as "play." The mothers of Herot express scorn for the men whose control over

their bodies is recognized as training, as effort, and thus is allowed to be relinquished: “Our husbands sit on comfortable chairs. Have we ever sat in comfortable chairs? No. Yoga balls, haunches tensed.” (56)

Just as the women of Herot are not permitted to display physical power without their bodies betraying those who own them, they are also not allowed to wield power in politics or in the community. Throughout the novel, the mothers of Herot express resentment towards the men who hold important public positions, which they have the skills to succeed at but are barred from entering. As they enter the police station to demand that Ben Woolf rescue Dylan and kill Dana Mills, the mothers declare that they “should be the police, that’s the truth of the matter” (153). A woman in Herot only has the authority and status lent to her by the man who claims her; she does not own her self, and thus can claim nothing for herself. To do so would be to establish her own body as a location of public power, allowing her body to betray its owners by entering the masculine sphere and defying the expectation of docility. Claiming one’s body in such a way to seize power for oneself against is thus forbidden. When Willa’s husband Roger has died and she believes that Ben, her lover and next husband is dead too, she contemplates the prospect of her future without a male figure. Willa believes that being without a husband means “she’ll have to move away” from Herot, despite having lived there for seven years and her claim of ownership to her home as well as to Herot itself: the idea of being a single woman living in Herot, much less its “heir,” is unthinkable (191). In order to reclaim her authority as the heir of Herot, Willa must marry Ben Woolf, and “make him” into a man who can claim public power on her behalf (173).

## The Danger of Female Power

When women openly establish their bodies as the locations of physical or public power, they are betraying the male patriarchal authorities who own their bodies and claiming them for themselves. In a word, they become monstrous: enemies of men, of authority, of community. *The Mere Wife* displays this through the use of monstrous imagery with regards to women who are powerful. Dana, who displays physical as well as war-making public power by being a trained female soldier, is the most clear example of a woman who is monstrous in her power. This, among other factors, makes her a terrifying figure to the people of Herot. Ben, the most present representative of masculinity in the novel, especially figures her as a “monster”: he is deeply threatened and confused by her ability to “take him on” despite his greater physical size, so much so that he sees her as something “unnatural,” something to be “burned” or “staked” rather than simply killed (162). Much is made, also, of the fact that Dana is a “woman with a sword -a sword!” (135) Though a sword is admittedly an archaic weapon, this shock may also be related to the image of a woman, and a mother rather than a maiden, wielding a decidedly phallic instrument of power and war.

It appears, however, that Dana is not alone in her monstrous power. The matriarchs of Herot feel a kinship with Dana’s ability to survive and what they see as a will to “kill everyone who gets in [her] way” (209). They fantasize about being her even as they imagine battling her. These women can see that they, too, are powerful enough to be made monsters of if their power were recognized by others. Even though the mothers, rather than overtly making their bodies locations of power, most often make use of it secretly or indirectly, the novel draws attention to the hidden transgressiveness of these acts by characterizing them as monstrous in their powerful moments. They remain fully in control of their monstrosity, concealing it from Herot at large, until novel’s end, but the novel reveals it in images: their “haunches tensed” as they sit on yoga

balls, their willingness to fight for their children “tooth and claw” (56, 270). Power transforms them into “furies in midday luncheon attire” (154). While men imagine that they go to war to protect their women, Herot’s women recognize that they themselves are “always at war,” and their experience in cultivating power, which requires even more power to control it so tightly, has given them “PhD’s in pain” (54, 268). In these recurring images of hardness and violence, the novel reveals that the controlled, compartmentalized power required of Herot women, in order to survive without threatening the authority of the men and the patriarchal order that their bodies are loyal to, becomes intensified, frenzied, rather than disappearing. We see that the mothers of Herot are not kept from war, aggressiveness, and physical strength, but are engaged in it up to the hilt. The violent, forceful, animal images associated with them expose to the reader the monstrous power they hide behind the facade of the docile wife and mother.

While controlled power is revealed as a monstrous potential threat to the patriarchal system, power unleashed proves itself even more monstrous in *The Mere Wife*. Throughout the novel, gradually increasing glimpses of Willa’s power, aggression, and monstrosity begin to reveal themselves. In one scene early in the novel, we see Willa’s control of her suppressed anger and violence begin to slip. As Dylan is throwing a tantrum outside in the snow, for which Roger clearly blames her, Willa slaps her son. Here, she feels herself “let go” of the self control that leads her to suppress physical force and aggression, and at the same time she feels a monstrous “creature rising” inside her, with “horns and claws” and a “lashing” tail (90). This image displays the monstrosity of Willa’s allowing her body to feel anger and embody it through violence, of her “letting go.” The scene also reiterates how the inflexible suppression of physical force, anger, and conflict leads inevitably to a frenzied expression of these reactions in moments where control fails.

The novel includes a more final lapse of control over her body towards its end, in which Willa wakes to discover that Dylan has been killed and finds herself letting go more completely. “Screaming and screaming, beating her breast,” she allows her body to experience and express rage and violence (270). At the same time, she relinquishes control over her body’s physical, animal functions, such as her bladder and tear ducts; she also stops regulating her facial expressions and voice, abandoning concern for her public appearance. Although in these scenes of letting go, Willa appears to lose her claim of control over her body, this loss represents a refusal to tame one’s body into behaving for its owners under patriarchy. In these moments where she is not in control of her body, it becomes more hers than it has ever been, because it does not perform docility for the others it is supposed to belong to.

Soon after this, she makes the decision to go after Gren and Dana on her own, claiming her body for the purpose of waging war and violence. She imagines herself as “consuming [Dana’s] strength” and becoming a “revenant with a winged sword”; this represents a fantasy of transforming into a monstrously powerful female warrior, who is, like Dana, able to wield a phallic weapon despite being a mother and thus a woman (279). This declaration is also identified with her plans for wielding public power in the community and the nation by running for office herself, transgressively claiming her own body as the seat of authority, “never [to] be a wife again” (263). Willa’s vow to seize war-making power, both physical and public, for herself is followed shortly by her most complete metamorphosis into a monstrous being, with the morphing of her hands into “something other than the hands she’s used to seeing... the talons long and curved, pearlescent” (295). It is worth noting, however, that Willa does not transform alone: she sees all of Herot’s residents, including “the women with their perfect faces,” revealing inner monstrosity that has “always been there, coarse fur and gaping maws, whipping tails,

scales, claws, and hunger” (296). The monstrosity of female power, then, is held in common across all of Herot’s matriarchs; what is unique to Willa is not her body’s possession or use of it, but in her final failure or refusal to properly suppress and conceal it.

## Chapter 2: Appetite, Desire, and Self-Denial

As Willa drinks her coffee the morning before the inaugural run of the Herot Heritage train, everything in her life appears perfect. The ceremony of the train’s first run promises to represent “years of work coming to fruition” (225). Suddenly, a mouse runs into her kitchen, and Willa feels the life she has built “falter” (225). The mouse is a “tiny thing in the center of perfection, gnawing” (225).

Though the mouse itself is perhaps a flaw in Willa’s spotless kitchen, what Willa truly feels “gnawing” at the perfection of her life is her own hunger. Her hunger is a flaw that prevents her from being the ideal woman she pretends to be, and that threatens to turn her into the monster that a hungry woman is to Herot society. Though Willa appears content in her “shining room” and her “shining house,” she is starving (225). She feels hunger pangs in her stomach, having eaten nothing except a few stolen, secret bites of raw steak the previous night. Secretly, she imagines devouring hamburgers, milkshakes, cookies; in Willa’s ravenous hunger, these desires mingle with carnivorous, animal ones, for raw meat, a “tsunami of flesh” (226). The mouse in Willa’s kitchen awakens her hunger, and with it her monstrosity. This is why she “feels everything falter” when she sees it, even as she jokes lightly with her husband that she’s going to eat the creature (225).

### Consumption as Transgression

The women of Herot are not allowed to consume food. A woman's function in patriarchal society is only to serve others, and by taking in food, she chooses to serve herself, which constitutes a betrayal against her body's owners. Why should she fulfill her own body's desires, or even feel them, when doing so does not contribute to the needs of her family or community? Their bodies are not their own, so they have no right to care for themselves, or to have a need for care. As Susan Bordo argues in her book *Unbearable Weight*, a feminist exploration of women's bodies in Western culture, patriarchal control over female consumption is an expression of the control of female desire (171). To eat, to satisfy oneself, is to claim one's body as belonging to oneself and having its own self-serving desires.

Consuming food is transgressive for women not only because it serves herself rather than others, but because it is viewed as taking something from others. This occurs on multiple levels. In the first place, for a woman to eat is seen as detracting from the ideal female body for male objectification and gratification. Willa is constantly reminded to maintain her body because she has "a man to keep" (24). Because her body is seen as belonging to him, and the ideal female body is seen as slender, anything that Willa consumes is taking from her husband Roger the ideal body that is owed him. Eating would steal her body away from men by satiating its desires against their will. Whether consumption actually leads to bodily change or not is irrelevant; the threat to the ideal body and the challenge to male supremacy over the body is enough. For much of the same reasons, female consumption also "steals" from the patriarchal system of society as a whole, as eating women threaten the perfectly slender ideal that society requires them to embody. In addition, by recognizing and indulging hunger, a woman troubles the patriarchal ideal of woman as a creature without desire, who cannot receive pleasure except by serving, "the one form of desire that is appropriately hers" (Bordo 118).

However transgressive a woman's hunger is, a mother's hunger is even more transgressive, as it is perceived to come at the expense of her children. A woman's function, in a society like Herot, is to bear and nurture children; feeding one's children is perhaps the most basic and recognizable "motherly" act. As Bordo puts it, "denial of self and the feeding of others are hopelessly enmeshed in... the ideal mother" (118). Being a wife and mother in a society such as Herot means learning to feed others rather than oneself. In Herot, the responsibility to nurture is more than a family matter. It is perceived as a duty to the public, to raise more men to continue the community and women to serve them. Willa must nurture publicly, visibly, posting photographs of the dinners she makes in order to maintain her "claim to fame" as a Herot mother (20).

The mothers of Herot are required to nurture and feed not only their own children, moreover, but the children of the entire community. When Willa goes to the playground with Dylan, she is expected to bring snacks not only for him, but for all the other Herot children as well. Willa recognizes this imperative to nurture for what it is: the claim that her child and of Herot's children hold on her. As a mother, her body no longer belongs to her, but must be relinquished to any child that demands to be fed. Willa resents Dylan and the other children of Herot for this obligation, thinking of them as "monsters" (20). She is willing to travel six miles outside of Herot to go to a different playground where she can pretend that she belongs to herself rather than to children, fantasizing that "Dylan isn't hers and she isn't his" (20).

These feelings of reluctance and resentment towards the demands of motherhood and the responsibility of feeding others are not uncommon among mothers in Western patriarchal society. As Jane M. Ussher's *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* explains, many mothers experience the responsibility of nurturing as overwhelming and

objectifying. One mother interviewed by Ussher described feeling like a “feeding machine” for her child (99). Like Willa, she feels exhausted by being regarded as a food source.

Breastfeeding in particular can be draining on mothers’ sense of bodily sovereignty. Deborah Lupton and Virginia Schmied’s article “Blurring the Boundaries: Breastfeeding and Maternal Subjectivity” explores the emotional experience of breastfeeding for new mothers. The article’s interviews with 25 first-time mothers characterize many of the women as being frustrated, much like Willa, by the claim of their children on their bodies. Some mothers reported feeling their sense of “self and agency” encroached on by the hunger of their babies (241). One mother felt that she was no longer “her own person,” but “*his* [her baby’s] person” (241). These mothers, like Willa, perceived their bodies as being the possessions of an other, their chand wished to have their “body back” (241). One woman even felt so disconnected from her own body as to dehumanize it, visualizing her body as a machine for the feeding of her child, which is “on tap all the time” (241). As with Willa, the child’s entitlement to the body could be said to foster a sense of resentment or animosity between the child and the mother. One woman referred to breastfeeding as “a battleground” rather than a bonding experience, while others described their children in negative, parasitic images like “the rotten sucking little leech,” and “metaphors of intrusion and devourment,” such as being “sucked dry” (242-243).

These experiences of real-world mothers with breastfeeding depart starkly from much of feminist theory and parenting discourse alike, which encourage breastfeeding as a universally positive bonding experience for mothers and children in the absence of technical problems. The interviewees described breastfeeding as “natural” and integral to identification as a “good” mother (Lupton and Schmied 238). This public and media affirmation of breastfeeding as the

only way to be a good mother demonstrates how the bodies of mothers are owned and controlled, not just by their children, but by the expectations of the community.

Much in the same way that these women do, Willa is troubled by the physical demand that children require of her during nursing. After mentioning that the mothers of Herot are expected to provide snacks for all of the community's children, Willa remembers a related moment when another mother's baby latched onto her breast. She describes the baby's "mouth agape, a triangle of shocking pink," making the act seem deliberate and unsettling, almost vampiric (21). In her mind, she calls the child a "viper," but must dismiss the thought (21).

Here, we see a child stake its claim on Willa's body. As a mother, her body no longer belongs to her, but must be relinquished to any child that demands to be fed. Willa experiences this loss of bodily control as painful and upsetting, but has to "redact" these thoughts because her communal duty to nurture the child overrides any desire she may have about what to do with her body, including the desire to keep it to herself (21). This very bodily appropriation of Willa for the purpose of feeding and nurturing is linked, by being mentioned in the same scene, with the responsibility of providing snacks, indicating that the demand to give of oneself to feed others and the trauma it causes goes beyond nursing, but extends throughout motherhood. The link between the image of the breastfeeding baby as viper and the responsibility of bringing snacks to the playground suggests the persistent suffering of a life in which one is expected to starve oneself while feeding others.

In one of the many food-related fantasies that Willa has throughout the novel, she imagines serving the baby that attaches itself to her breast as a snack, its neck broken, "surrounded by sippy yogurt and mashed peas" (21). Here, Willa imagines fulfilling her body's desires, in this case the desire to keep her body from being a public food source, as an act of

cruelty against the child. This image shows how a mother's bodily desires and the refusal to allow others' desires to supersede them is framed as a selfish, wicked act that does bodily harm to the child. By the terms of Herot motherhood, having bodily needs of one's own is a sin committed directly against a child, tantamount to killing and consuming it.

Mothers in Herot also become mothers to the community in the sense of feeding and nurturing through the process of hostessing. Part of the responsibility of being a woman in the Herot community involves bringing members of the community into the household and "nurturing" them by serving food. As Willa spends hours planning and preparing food to feed others at these events, she eats very little in order to prepare her body to fulfill the expectations of the community. This responsibility is ingrained into her role as prominent housewife of Herot; even when Willa is in shock about Dana and Gren's intrusions into her New Year's Eve party, she thinks of the appetizers in her kitchen, concerned that "everyone must be hungry" (123).

The role of hostess is often an uncomfortable one for Willa. She is expected to prepare impressive, flawless meals for her guests and to "photograph for the masses," under the scrutinizing eye of the Herot matriarchs, whose visit before her party inspires her to imagine boiling the goose fat and pouring it over them (56). The novel demonstrates how traumatizing and damaging the role of hostessing is in Willa's imagination through another of her dreams, this time a dream in which she serves wine to people at a party. Her pitcher of wine leaks so that each cup she pours spills wine onto her dress "until the whole front is red" (84). This dream illustrates how draining it is for Willa to be constantly at the disposal of others' needs and responsible for nourishing them, while she is forbidden from nourishing herself. In another dream which reflects this suffering, Willa imagines audiences watching her as she bathes in milk, which turns from white to pink to red as she bleeds into it. Here, we see that her body is literally drained,

becoming “paler and paler,” losing its sustenance for the benefit of the others that are watching her (264). The image of the milk mingling with her blood is particularly evocative, as it is reminiscent of breast milk; the fluid that nourishes others is also the sustaining lifeblood that Willa painfully sacrifices.

## Rules Governing Female Consumption

Women in Herot are not allowed to consume food because their bodies are bound to serve their men, children, and communities. However, while the act of eating is forbidden in the ideal, it is also necessary in practice. Therefore, since outright eliminating the consumption of food is impossible, the act is highly regulated. There are also a number of rules governing the ways in which women are allowed to eat.

When they must eat, women are expected to consume as little as possible, and essentially starve themselves. They are never allowed to eat to excess or even to satiation; only small indulgences of hunger are permitted. The chapter “Hunger as Ideology” in Bordo’s book discusses how these restrictions are represented in advertising for food products: “Women are used to advertise individually wrapped pieces of tiny, bite-sized candies...instead of the mounds of cake and oozing frosting typical of commercials featuring male eaters” (129). Even though women have to eat in order to sustain themselves, they “are not even permitted...the full satisfaction of their hungers” (129).

Because eating is a taboo act, women are also expected to feel compulsory guilt when they eat, and especially when they receive pleasure from eating. As Bordo’s book describes in a chapter about how food products are marketed to women, female consumption is considered a “shameful” act; a woman in an advertisement who has been discovered eating is “sheepish, her

glance averted” (129). Feeling pleasure from eating is something taboo and transgressive, “an act of ‘cheating’” (112). In advertising, a woman is permitted to “feel good about saying “Yes”” only to “a harmless, low-calorie product” (130). However, such “guilt-free” foods are a fantasy created in order to sell diet products, and in reality even “harmless” foods are accompanied by some level of guilt: eating nothing is “better yet” than eating even a salad (130). Another cardinal rule of women’s eating is that, being illicit, it is done in secret, “to be indulged in only when no one is looking” (129).

Willa embodies these rules in the ways that she thinks about and consumes food. Starving herself for the launch of the train, she takes three quick bites of Ben’s raw steak from the fridge, then wraps it up again to hide her transgression. At another moment in the novel, she sneaks a taste from a container of ice cream at the store with her finger, before putting it back into the freezer for someone else to buy. Both of these events involve small indulgences rather than satiation of hunger; both are furtive, shameful acts which others are not allowed to know about (except Willa’s son, who is invited to participate in the ice cream escapade, with a warning not to tell his father.) It is also significant that she is not allowed to possess either of the foods that she desires- she can only sneak bites of things that belong to others. When preparing for her New Year’s Eve party, Willa imagines ordering pizza instead. The horror of consuming large amounts of “dairy, fat and gluten” publicly rather than tiny “toothpicked morsels” is an “evil” thought (85).

Although men in Herot regulate their consumption as well, they are not expected to starve themselves in the same way that women are, or seen as “disgusting and transgressive” when they eat to satiation (Bordo 110). Ben Woolf, a police officer, former soldier, and Willa’s third husband does not allow himself to eat carbs, as he associates these with losing his physical

fitness and thus with a failure of masculinity. Clearly, masculinity is accompanied by its own set of problems with food and body image. However, though he does deny himself certain foods, he is able to eat plates of food such as beef and eggs voraciously without feeling any apparent guilt or shame. Hunger, even ravenous hunger, does not seem to be a problem for men in Herot either; it is practically a requirement. It is a part of Ben's sons' masculine education that they learn to "eat their meat bloody" (250). Though of course many men do experience disordered eating, the novel points out that the social imperative to suppress all hunger is not enforced by gender expectations in the same way for men as it is for women.

Women are not only required to deny themselves food; they have to deny even experiencing hunger. To desire food, even if one does not fulfill that desire, is to acknowledge that the body has needs of its own, and women are not allowed to focus on their own needs, even to reject them. Hunger marks the female body as a needful one, rather than an object whose only desire is to serve. Even desires for "self-nurturance and self-feeding" are "greedy and excessive," because they cause a woman to think of her own needs and thus distract from her responsibility to serve others (171).

Patriarchal society also requires that women do not acknowledge hunger because it is uncomfortable with the extent to which it requires women to starve. This is especially true in the contemporary moment, in which feminism has been introduced into mainstream society. Patriarchal requirements for women must appear less overtly "oppressive" than previously; the idea that women must be constantly in a state of hunger is not a comfortable reality. As Bordo's book argues, disordered eating is fairly common amongst women in the United States; Willa exhibits this in the way that she obsessively thinks about and regulates her intake of food. However, because her body type remains "normally" slender, the Herot community can feel

comfortable pretending that she is “healthy.” Disordered eating is only acknowledged as a problem when the body itself becomes visibly “abnormal” (Bordo 186). This allows public opinion to conceptualize unhealthy attitudes toward food as an entirely “pathological” issue, rather than recognizing the social factors that contribute to them (Bordo 49). The novel pushes back against this idea that disordered eating is a solely pathological issue through Willa, whose thoughts about food are clearly unhealthy but are considered the normal way of thinking by the women in her society.

In the same way, women are required to keep their hunger invisible so that patriarchal communities are able to maintain the fantasy that its women are healthy rather than starving. Willa has thoughts of hunger throughout much of the novel, but never voices them to anyone, even other women; she rarely if ever even mentions dieting. Herot’s grocery stores, free of processed food, and its restaurants with “avocado toast, vegan cupcakes, and gluten-free pasta” all work to maintain the fantasy that Herot’s women are healthy and health-conscious, rather than starving and image-conscious (223). The matriarchs pay lip service to mainstream feminist body positivity, albeit in a backhanded manner, when Tina comments that she “love[s] how [Willa] doesn’t care about calories” (56). They are never allowed to vocally reveal their hunger or any longing for food; instead, the mothers of Herot “shudder” in revulsion at the idea of eating fatty foods, feigning that their abstinence stems from a lack of desire (56).

Like Bordo’s ideal woman, they (outwardly) display a “cool” attitude towards food (100). Hunger is an inevitable symptom of the self-denial that patriarchal expectations for women’s bodies, but these expectations disavow the same hunger that they require. It must be concealed, suppressed, because Herot wants its women indifferent to food rather than openly tortured by it. Even thoughts must be regulated: Willa attempts to stop her thoughts “in [their] tracks” when

they threaten to remind her of hors d'oeuvres she wants to eat (133). Only Willa's uncontrollable, obsessive desires for food throughout the novel betray the lengths that women's bodies must go to in order to meet the demands of those who own them.

This contradiction of expectations sets up an impossible system for women to sustainably function in, where they are forced to go hungry but have no right to feel or express hunger. Their desire for food has no outlet; being made to starve themselves, they are not even permitted to share their struggles with food with other women, because being honest and sharing their experiences would destroy their facade of the cool, indifferent woman who has no desires of her own. This system of requirements puts women under enormous pressure to suppress and compartmentalize their hunger. Through constant denial and suppression, healthy appetites turn into ravenous, excessive desires.

### Self-Denial Becoming Monstrous

The simultaneous creation and suppression of hunger leads to the emergence of the monstrous among the women of Herot. Rather than becoming an ideal female body, which is indifferent to food and exists only as a source of nurturing, Willa's body becomes "a body made of hunger" (264). The more she denies herself, the more frenzied and excessive her desires become. This tightly compressed, concealed hunger becomes expressed through monstrous imagery in the novel.

Willa's thoughts about food and her obsessive hunger are tied closely to images of monstrosity or animality. Compelled by her society to starve herself, Willa has periodic "bad adventures" of eating in her imagination (21). In these moments, Willa thinks of consuming "hamburgers from drive-through windows, creamy milkshakes, boxes of Girl Scout cookies"

(226). She dreams of eating to complete satiation and being overstuffed, her body “plumbed with something other than desire” (229). Some of her fantasies are specifically of public satiation, for example how “monstrous” it would be to have pizza for her party (85). This fantasy defies the idea of female indulgence as furtive. These fantasies of excess are paired with carnivorous images: Willa eating raw steak, “imagining a tsunami of flesh” (226). The ambiguity of this phrase is particularly compelling, as it is not specified what kind of flesh she is hungry for, whether it is a hamburger or a human being. Gluttony is tied to cruelty and violence in another moment where Willa thinks about drinking the fat from the goose as well as boiling it and pouring it over an enemy. Eating is also equated with monstrosity in the form of killing and cannibalism. As Willa brings caviar, a notoriously indulgent food, home from the market, she pictures herself “carrying two hearts on ice,” still living. In a life condemned to starve for the feeding of others, Willa fantasizes about consuming them for herself (86). To consume the bodies of others and satiate her own ravenous hunger would be the ultimate rebellion against her destiny as a woman.

Susan Bordo describes female self-starvation as a way that “culture is inscribed on the body”: through the pursuit of a feminine ideal, women change their daily practices, “organizing time and space” to modify themselves for patriarchal expectations (166). In other words, patriarchal authority owns and controls female bodies literally, modifying their behavior and experience in order to be of better service. However, this requirement leads to intensified, frenzied hunger, as well as a woman who is ever-conscious of her bodily desires in an effort to suppress them. The “inscription” of culture “on the body” here takes another form, in the creation of a monstrous body, mad with hunger and liable to gorge itself in frenetic moments of letting go (171). Willa attempts to distance herself from her monstrous body, prefacing her

fantasies of devouring with denial. She proclaims that she would *never* do such things: “she’d never fling her entire body at any of this, her hands open for fistfuls of sugar cereal. Bottles of olive oil, wine by the liter, sitting on the floor in a heap of potato chips” (229). Again, imagining how she’d look during this “bad adventure,” Willa evokes the transgression of eating for an audience, being discovered with “her cheeks puffed around unchewed bites” (229).

## Women as Sexual Objects

Sexual desire also figures into patriarchal concerns about female hunger. As Bordo explains in *Unbearable Weight*, sexual appetite and appetite for food often cross over in popular media: they are conflated, or used as metaphors to express each other. As with hunger, women’s sexual desire is transgressive. Women are expected to be passive sexual objects for male desire, as their bodies belong to men and the male gaze. They are required to be sexually available for the pleasure of their male partners, and to fit a constructed image of sexual desirability so as to be a proper object for the gaze of other men. They are not expected to seek or receive pleasure on their own terms, as female sexual agency displaces the role of the male as sexual subject. The only acceptable sexual behavior for women is passive receptivity, and the only way in which they are allowed to feel pleasure is through serving the pleasure of others. Julia Kristeva’s essay “*Stabat Mater*” conceives the ideal female body in the image of the breasts: a woman that exists entirely to nurture others and to be an object for male desire and gratification, as opposed to the vagina, which is able to experience sexual pleasure as well as giving it (142).

During Willa’s young adulthood in the city, when the regulations of being a Herot woman are lifted, Willa is able to be open about her sexual desires. She is able to express her sexuality through her clothing, wearing “a tunic that barely covered her bottom” and peacock

feather-printed fishnets, something “she’d never” be allowed to do as a Herot wife (20). She is also able to be with a partner that she desires, her first husband Richie, and is not required to control or conceal her desire for him. She has pleasant memories of kissing him “smashed up against a brick wall” (22). The verb “smashed” suggests a messy, uncontrived encounter. This contrasts with her relationship with her second husband, Roger. In this relationship, Willa demonstrates the ideal female sexual role under patriarchy. She constructs sexual encounters specifically to please him, buying lingerie that the saleswoman advises her is “what men want” (43). She does not describe receiving any physical pleasure from her sex with Roger. Her thoughts as well are very detached from the sex itself: she spends the time thinking about how her legs look -“long and pink, like fronds”- and whether the countertop she arches backwards on is clean (43).

The main pleasure that Willa seems to receive from intimacy with Roger is in demonstrating his desire for her to others. When they have sex on Christmas Eve, Willa is concerned largely with the aesthetics of the act as it is reflected in the window of her kitchen. She seems to be satisfied with the idea that someone might see her -“if anyone’s watching from out there, let them watch” (44). Likewise, when he kisses her she receives pleasure mostly from how it looks, especially when “in front of guests” (20). Her focus on performing sexual experiences for his pleasure and for onlookers shows that she is most concerned with fulfilling her role as an object of male desire and having the community know that she is doing so.

In patriarchal society, sexual desire is the privilege of men. Men are not expected or required to have control over their desires. Both Roger Herot and his father Dylan Sr. are unfaithful to their wives, and the mothers speak of these encounters with resignation, only asking that “if you cheat, you cheat in the city” (96). Willa thinks of her son Dylan as equally incapable

of sexual restraint, predicting with equal resignation that “he’ll be somebody’s cheating husband one day” (197). It is women who are expected to manage male desires, by refusing illicit sex as well as by making themselves the ideal objects of desire for their husbands in order to keep them satisfied enough not to stray, to “keep” them as Willa’s mother Diane puts it (24). She must also have control over their sex life by arranging and preparing for sexual encounters and methodically making sure that their life remains orderly afterwards. Roger is expected to be reckless in his desires; the expectation of carefulness, forethought, and afterthought with regards to sex falls to Willa.

Thus, though Willa is expected to have sex with Roger, their sexual encounters cannot be messy or reckless in any way that suggests a lapse in restraint. They are planned complete with lingerie, surfaces are sterilized in advance, and all evidence of the act should be cleaned up afterwards. We see this in Willa’s kitchen the morning after she and Roger have sex there. Entering the area with the mother of Herot, she fears suddenly and irrationally that her panties are still on the floor from the night before. This failure of discretion would be Willa’s responsibility and her transgression, as she is expected to have control over the situation; she is not allowed to have desires that excuse her carelessness. A reckless sexual encounter with her husband that was not properly contained would be such a transgressive act that Willa has a vision of her panties on the floor out of fear, when she knows they are not there.

If uncontrolled sex with her husband is a violation, sex outside of Willa’s marriage is an extremely shameful sin. Even the slightest suggestion that Willa might be having an affair, as Roger’s mother Tina mentions the possibility of “a guest” and glances towards the two wineglasses on the counter, is enough to make her feel anxious and guilty, as her “pulse visits her eyeballs,” even though the second wineglass was Roger’s (54-55). The residents of Herot are

certainly not resigned to the infidelities of its women, as they have the responsibility of managing men's sexual desires and ideally have none of their own at all. Roger's affair with Louisa, one of the other married women in Herot, is unforgivable for Louisa in the eyes of the community. Even after Roger has died and Willa has caused her to miscarry Roger's illegitimate child, Louisa still must move out of the neighborhood altogether under the supervision of the mothers.

### Transgression as Monstrosity

When women demonstrate sexual agency by seeking sex for their own pleasure, they claim their bodies as their own, and thus become monstrous. When Dana becomes pregnant as a soldier during wartime, she is condemned by the other soldiers for assumedly having sex with a member of the enemy. They view her as either "a victim or a collaborator," in other words saying that if she has had sexual agency in this event, she is evil, traitorous, monstrous, although it is difficult to imagine that a male soldier would be condemned in the same manner for sexual activity in foreign territory (8). Men's sexual appetites in Herot are largely accepted, even outside of marriage, unless they implicate the sexual transgressions of women in the community as well: "if you cheat, you cheat in the city" (96). This implication of Louisa, a Herot woman, as sexually transgressive is what makes Roger's affair with her taboo, not his breach of marital contract.

The same sexual transgressiveness is what makes Tina, Roger's mother and one of the Herot matriarchs, herself a monster: her relationship with Dylan Sr., Roger's father, began as an extramarital affair, after which she was converted "from secretary into wife" (204). The other wives regarded her as a "wild animal" for her sexual transgression, but were forced to

accept her into their ranks because she was “promoted” to a Herot wife by Dylan Herot Sr., who they must obey because he is male (204-205). However, her monstrosity does not disappear over time, but is remembered by the Herot wives. Their revenge for her transgression comes at the moment of her death, when Diane visits her in the hospital when she is sick with cancer and poisons her in order to secure the Herot inheritance for Willa.

Willa herself also becomes a monster through gaining sexual agency. Shortly after her husband’s death, she begins an affair with Ben Woolf, a police officer investigating the kidnapping of Dylan and the intrusion of Dana into Willa’s home. She initiates their affair, committing monstrosity by exercising sexual agency and rebelling against a life in which she has “never gotten anything close to what she wants” (151). Willa is no longer preoccupied with the aesthetics of their sex: her lips are “scraped,” her biceps “bruised” (150). Rather than the event being contrived solely for Ben’s satisfaction, Willa seems to gain pleasure from their sex as well, feeling like “a queen with a hoard” as she touches his hair (150). The novel ties the pleasure she experiences with monstrous imagery: her body is “unexpectedly seized with something that... isn’t even human” (150). Monstrosity is also signaled by Willa’s abandonment of both female docility and human speech. Noticing how Ben “roars, no care for who might hear” while she attempts to preserve propriety by quieting herself, Willa “spits out the pillow” between her teeth and “screams” (150).

Willa’s experience of her monstrous body and its hungers as a separate creature within her, whose dreams of devouring she lapses into before she “carefully, meticulously, covers [them] back up,” constantly “filing down” the sharp edges that lurk inside her (229). This dissociation, however, becomes increasingly troubled as her story progresses. The novel ceases to delineate between Willa’s life and her dreams, which are sometimes narrated as if they

actually happen: “She bends over and picks the mouse up...she breaks its neck, places it on her tongue, chews, and swallows” (229). This confused narration signals that Willa herself is confused and is losing control of her monstrous hunger. The writing, like her, then must snap out of the monstrous fantasy and backtrack into denial: “No. She dangles it over the garbage disposal, flips the switch, and runs the water” (229).

Eventually, the boundary between fantasy and reality collapses entirely. During a dream Willa has, she finds Gren, the monster from the mountain who she wasn't sure existed but has feared for years, in her kitchen. She kills him, cuts out his heart, and eats it, in a moment that dissolves the boundaries between dreams and reality: “She's sleeping when she cuts out the heart. Is she? Is this a mouse, is this her mouth? She licks her fingers. Does she?” (282) She wakes to find her son Dylan murdered, and believes that her second husband Ben has killed him. Only later, when she is arrested at Dylan's funeral and the inaugural run of the Herot Heritage train, does she realize that she in fact killed him. She feels his heart inside her, “beating, beating” (295). In this moment, a sort of reversal of birth, she has transgressed the furthest boundary into monstrosity, having eaten her child whom she is meant to feed and nurture with her body. Rather than sacrificing her hunger for her son, she has sacrificed her son to her hunger. She also relinquishes control over her sexual desires in this moment, realizing that the envy and desire to consume that she feels for Dana can only be described as “lust” (295). This desire for another woman is a clear violation of what she is allowed to do under patriarchy, as it in no way serves men or seeks to please them. Willa becomes a monster who seeks to consume for the sake of her own body's desires, at the expense of her husband and children's claims on her. As the other members of Herot Hall likewise turn into creatures, they too reveal what is concealed beneath masks of cool indifference -monstrous “hunger, and teeth, and teeth, and teeth” (296).

## Chapter 3: Pregnancy and Bodily Autonomy

One scene in *The Mere Wife* describes Willa's memory of shopping with her mother while pregnant with her son, Dylan. A fat woman smiles at her, but Willa's attempt to return her kindness is countered by her mother Diane. Diane "shakes a finger" at the woman's fatness, a bodily eruption which is tantamount to a crime in Herot (56). She threatens that the woman's sinful size is the punishment for "letting herself go" (56). It is ambiguous who her comments are directed towards -whether she is chastising the woman or threatening Willa with an undesirable future.

Willa describes her mother as "almost crossing herself" during the experience, indicating that Diane feels fear, as well as loathing, towards the woman's fat (56). Diane fears the possibility of becoming fat herself, and takes this woman's fat as a "warning" to herself, a threat that will motivate her to continue "liv[ing] on protein bars" (56). Despite her mother's reminders that Herot society condemns women with fat on their bodies, Willa is "enticed" with the stranger's body: she envies and desires the woman's ability to be "gloriously enormous and unapologetic," to simply allow herself to be fat in public, to allow her body to be a body, and smile at women in the store without shame (56). Her jealousy is compounded by the fact that Willa's body is also fat at this moment, and thus complicit in the woman's transgression; this scene occurs while Willa is pregnant with her son, Dylan. As she is seven months pregnant, we can assume that her stomach is visibly enlarged at this point. Other parts of her body are changed as well; the scene mentions specifically the fat on her upper arms. Willa's pregnancy complicates the issue of fatness and bodily eruption.

### Pregnancy as an Embodied Experience

Pregnancy is a rare exception in which women's bodies are allowed to take up space. In a society such as Herot where largeness for women is condemned as a taboo use of their bodies, the largeness of the pregnant woman is sanctioned by patriarchy. Having children is one of the ways in which women are of service to the men who own their bodies. By becoming mothers, they bear and nurture children who belong to their men, perpetuating the male lineage as well as reproducing the patriarchal community. Ordinarily, the female body must be contained; eruptions such as fat, leakiness, fat, bodily functions, expressions of uncontrolled desire, or animal characteristics are taboo and must be suppressed or concealed. Pregnancy, however, is disruptive to women's ability to fulfill these expectations, and because it is necessary for the patriarchy to continue, the restraints on women's bodies must be altered for pregnant women.

Pop culture is rife with images of pregnant women being "out of control" of their bodies (Oliver 765). Kelly Oliver's "Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years of Gestation" lists examples of "the awkwardness of the pregnant body" as the "source of the comedy" in popular movies (765). Scenes of pregnant women vomiting uncontrollably are common; Oliver cites the film *Juno*, in which "the leading lady pukes blue-slushy into her stepmother's vase," as an example of this (765). Willa herself also vomits into a snorkel on her honeymoon when she is pregnant. It is also a commonly cited trope that if a woman vomits in a movie or television show, she must be pregnant; the idea of a woman vomiting for any other reason, such as nausea or food poisoning, though physically possible, seems so unlikely to viewers that pregnancy can be the only reason such a bodily eruption would occur onscreen. The inability to control other bodily functions, such as urination, is likewise a common stereotype about pregnancy in pop culture.

Pregnant women's cravings for food, which would be a taboo for non-pregnant women, are another trope often used for comedy in movies and television. This trope in particular relates to a perceived lapse of control over female desires, which are disallowed by patriarchy under normal circumstances. Such eruptions of desire are expressed in other ways as well: comedy films and television depict pregnant women as demanding, emotional, and irrational, with their husbands and male friends forced to cater to their every whim. Even transgressive female sexual appetite is invoked; one episode of the popular 90's sitcom *Friends* depicts Rachel experiencing strong sexual desire due to hormonal changes, which is portrayed as comedic.

These examples of the bodily transgressions of pregnancy in comedy suggest that the caged female body is released from its expectations, while it performs the necessary function of reproducing the patriarchy. *The Mere Wife* reveals that the expectations for women's bodies are not lifted during pregnancy, but merely altered to allow the bare minimum of bodiliness necessary in order to give birth. Although women's bodies are expected to gain weight and become larger during pregnancy, there are limits to the ways in which a pregnant woman is allowed to take up space. She is still expected to minimize her largeness as much as possible. Willa's pregnancy at her wedding limits the type of dress she is able to wear; she must "hide the lines" of her pregnant body with "shadows," deemphasizing the swell of her stomach (204). Herot society is not accepting of the full range of ways in which pregnancy changes women's bodies. There is a certain way to be pregnant, a certain way in which the pregnant body can take up space, and these bodies still have the potential to transgress.

Furthermore, while the restrictions on women's bodies are to some extent lifted, the shame associated with bodiliness is not. Films that exploit pregnant women's lack of control

over their bodies for comedy fail to explore women's feelings about their bodies being made to behave in ways which they have been conditioned to see as disgusting, transgressive, shameful. The novel explores this with the scene where Willa encounters the larger woman at the store with her mother. She envies the woman not just for her fat, but for her smile, her ability to be "gloriously enormous and unapologetic" (56). Willa envies these things because she herself is pregnant, and thus in the uncomfortable state of having to take on the largeness that she has been taught all her life is unacceptable. She is permitted to be "enormous," but certainly not "unapologetic;" she must still carry the shame of taking up space. This shame is not just in Willa's mind, but imposed by Herot society. Even while she is seven months pregnant, her mother looks accusingly at "the creamy way her skin pours from her sleeve" (56). Willa's pregnancy forces her to fulfill her shameful fantasies of being large "like a dinosaur" (85). The corporeality that pregnancy requires of women is still considered monstrous, both by themselves and by others. It is simply a monstrosity that women are made to reckon with on their own, forced to navigate the tension caused by the involuntary betrayals of their bodies against the standards of their society.

Women are also not excused for the ways that their bodies' behaviors are permanently altered by pregnancy. In order for women to remain perfect servants of the patriarchy, they are required to regain full control over their bodiliness immediately after pregnancy is over. To maintain the narrative that women's bodies can be efficient machines for serving others, mothers in Herot are required to deny and conceal the lasting effects that pregnancy and motherhood have on their bodies. They must immediately return to taking up as little space as possible and care for others without concern for themselves. After Willa gives birth, she is not allowed to rest and heal in peace. The mothers of Herot visit her bedside and treat her as though she has "lost vigilance"

over her body by allowing it to be changed (24). Without such vigilance, the pregnant body achieves unforgivable levels of leakiness. Not only are her breasts “leaking” milk, but the natural, animal behaviors of her body are “open” to the knowledge of others (24). The corporeality of Willa’s body is visible, known in a way that is no longer acceptable after she has given birth. It is as if her body is open to the public, “wander[ing] half naked through the streets” (24). The mothers attempt to redraw her bodily margins by returning her body to an object of male pleasure, uncomfortable with what they see as bodily unruliness, unsightliness, and lack of shame.

## The Self, Otherness and Subjectivity

Pregnancy can also be a disruptive and unsettling experience because it upsets the boundaries between what is the self and what is not. Being pregnant means that the child, an other, must be housed within the self. This disturbs the distinction between self and other, a boundary which is assumed and preferred to be clear and impenetrable. For a woman, who has spent her whole life attempting to maintain her body as a self-contained, bounded unit, the fluidity between self and other suggests a leakiness, a permeability of the body which she has been taught to see as transgressive and thus shameful.

Because the child is an unknown, an alien other, it is a monster, which violates the integrity of the self. Willa thinks of her pregnancy in images which display her horror at the presence of an alien other inside her body. When Dylan smiles at her, she thinks of her son’s skull and the layer of adult teeth “hidden above and below the pointed and pliable baby teeth, double rows, like those in a shark’s mouth” (59). The unsettling image of hidden rows of teeth waiting dormant inside the skull evokes the inscrutability of her child: though he lived within her

body, he is an other and thus not fully knowable. She perceives this unknowability, this otherness, as a potential threat; she does not know what dangers, like the hidden teeth, may be lurking within him. The child she carried within her may secretly be a “shark” (59).

And if she is capable of producing a monstrosity, her body may betray itself to be monstrous as well. The mother’s body is also taking part in a monstrous act by creating such an other. Willa’s imagination of her pregnant body making such a dangerous creature likewise suggests a vision of pregnancy as unsettling, even horrific, a monstrous process. Having experienced an abortion, as well as another ambiguous event which could have been an abortion or a miscarriage, Willa also views her body as a monstrous host to the other within it. She views her body as a dangerous place to inhabit, “a cave full of teeth” (40).

The process of carrying a child can also threaten the way a mother experiences herself as a subject residing inside her body. As Iris Marion Young explains in her essay “Pregnant Embodiment and Subjectivity,” the pregnant female body is inhabited by nested subjects. Its subjectivity is “decentered, split, or doubled,” residing in the pregnant woman’s “trunk as well as her head” (160). This has the potential to change the woman’s experience of her body; she is no longer able to equate her body with her self, as it is also the location of another self. Her body is both “herself and not herself” (160).

Dana describes something like a “split” subjectivity in *The Mere Wife* when she is pregnant with Gren; her body is the location of her self, but it is also a “tent” in which someone else “sleeps” (6). While perhaps not fully monstrous, Dana suggests that the experience is not entirely an idyllic one. She compares having Gren inside her to the way that the “warm room” of her body harbors memories of traumatic moments from being at war (46). Although Dana loves her son, having her body become a home for him is not entirely comfortable.

It is not only the physical experience of pregnancy that has the potential to disrupt a mother's experience of her body and self, however. The "split" subjectivity of pregnant bodies is complicated by the ways that patriarchal societies perceive their subject/object status. Because patriarchy already perceives women's bodies as objects, which exist for the service of men rather than for their own sake, the unborn child does not simply split female subjectivity, but completely overrides it. Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* describes the fetus as "effacing" female subjectivity: the mother is perceived as nothing more than a "container" for carrying the child (79,77). The child, rather than the mother, is the important subject within a pregnant body.

Rosemary Betterton's essay *Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination*, in its discussion of how pregnant bodies and the monstrous are linked in the work of certain visual artists, posits that the "visual economy" of patriarchal society does not know how to understand pregnant bodies, as they operate on a distinct and fixed binary between the self and the other (92). Patriarchal ideology thus chooses the fetus as the more important inhabitant of a mother's body. Pregnant women are relegated to being mere bodies, containers for cultivating the subject fetus.

*The Mere Wife* demonstrates how the subjectivity of women is effaced in favor of their children. Dana describes how, when she is imprisoned after becoming pregnant by a member of "the enemy," her torture at the hands of her fellow soldiers only ends because she is pregnant (237). She says that "there are rules about torturing mothers, though not about torturing women... you couldn't burn a pregnant witch, and you can't bend a pregnant soldier over backward and make her confess sins she doesn't remember" (238). Dana explains that it is not compassion for her as a woman or a human being that makes the men stop torturing her, but concern for her as a mother, for her body as a container for an unborn child. It is the fetus, not

the woman, that is valuable to men; the soldiers identify the fetus as the true inhabitant of her body. Dana's "saint," a female figure who appears to her throughout the story, confirms the usurpation of Dana's subjectivity for her. The saint says that Dana will be known to history as Gren's mother, rather than by her name (171). This statement refers to the character of Grendel's mother from *Beowulf*, and the fact that she has no name of her own; her identity exists only through her connection to her son.

Bordo explores how being pregnant in a society such as Herot strips women of little sovereignty they have over their bodies as mothers are required to efface her own subjectivity. Along with sacrificing her body and selfhood for her child, her desires for her body and her child are dismissed and trivialized as irrational, emotional, and unimportant. Bordo focuses largely on how this occurs during the period of pregnancy, but *The Mere Wife* demonstrates that the authority of women over their lives and bodies is effaced both before and after they become mothers. Before Willa has met her second husband Roger, her mother Diane mandates that she will get married and have a child with him. Even prior to Willa's pregnancy, her authority over her body is taken away by the patriarchal expectation that she must have a child. Her mother further predicts that "he'll want to be carried, and your knees'll give out on you. You'll never be able to wear heels again" (23). Already, before Willa's child even exists, he is taking control of her body and what she can do with it. Her subjectivity, body, and desires are effaced by her child's. Given that Willa was thus not allowed a choice in whether or not to have a child, it is no wonder that she sees her child as an enemy, a "bird of prey," a "wild animal," a monster (25, 43).

## Motherhood as Loss of Self

A final way in which motherhood can be monstrous to the women who endure it is that the role is inevitably one of loss. This process begins with birth, when the being that was part of one's body, a second self, leaves the body and becomes fully an other, and the mother becomes an other to the child as they begin to develop their own identity. Julia Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" recognizes the mother as a figure marked by suffering, because she must endure the agony of losing a part of her body to the world through giving birth (138). This essay imagines pregnancy and motherhood as a kind of communal, primal experience between mother and child, which must be broken as the child is born and begins to grow. From this moment, a mother must begin teaching her child to be a person in the world. She has the power and the responsibility of policing their actions and teach them to perform the roles that society requires of them. The communal relationship between them is broken by the necessity of enforcing patriarchal requirements.

Although Dana prolongs her close relationship with her son Gren and the safety it promises by keeping them both within the womb-like structure of the cave where they hide, eventually Gren "wants to be in the world," and leaves the cave secretly to form his own relationships and identity (216). She acknowledges that motherhood is "a job made for failure" at keeping one's child safe within the protection of the mother's self (274). Dana suffers this loss as an agony, because she has seen the hostility and danger of the world down the mountain in Herot; each time he shows interest in the world outside, she experiences the loss of her son viscerally, picturing his death. Gren is her "only family," the only person she loves, but he is also her "hurt," her "pain," because she knows that one day this part of her self will be lost to her (274).

Even Willa, who thinks of children as “monsters,” who wishes she could “dissolve her maternal bond” to her son “like gelatin in hot water,” experiences this suffering at the loss of her son (20, 229). Dylan, who has been at boarding school for some years and does not speak to his family, is killed by Willa in a dreamlike state. At the moment she discovers his body, she allows her body to perform publicly the leakiness she has been forced to conceal in her role as a Herot woman: “letting her bladder go, letting her tear ducts go, letting her face, frozen without wrinkles, go” (270). She “lets go” of her control over the unruliness of her body, and publicly, in front of the Herot matriarchs as well as neighbors and police. In this moment, by suffering the pain of losing her son, Willa is forced back into the role of motherhood, and relinquishes control of her self to the monstrous bodiliness that comes with it.

## Chapter 4: Mothers Policing Bodies

Just before Willa’s New Year’s Eve party, the Herot family collapses into chaos. After Gren, the boy from the mountain and Dylan’s friend, leaves a dead rabbit on the doorstep of their house, Willa and her husband Roger blame their son Dylan for having killed it. Dylan throws a tantrum, fearing that it is Gren’s body in a trash bag rather than the rabbit. Willa, frustrated with Dylan’s screaming as well as Roger’s blaming her for it, loses control of herself and slaps him, feeling a “creature rising” within her in the moment of “letting go” (90).

Suddenly, the matriarchs of Herot arrive for the party, and Willa becomes aware that she has been caught in a moment of failure as a hostess, mother and wife. She lacks makeup, dress, and a shower, with the food she is required to prepare burning in the kitchen and her family in obvious unrest. Most of all, both she and her son have been caught in a moment of monstrosity, a lapse of self-control. The arrival of her mother signals to Willa that she must recover control of

her body and her status as the perfect mother, wife, and hostess. Willa must perform damage control in order to contain the situation, cleaning up Dylan and rescuing the burning hors d'oeuvres. She rushes upstairs to “conceal everything” with “shower, blow-dryer, foundation, lipstick” so that no one will see the monstrosity that lurks “just under the surface” (91).

The mothers are the catalyst for Willa’s frantic attempts to reclaim her body and her reputation as the ideal Herot housewife. As she readies herself to be acceptable to appear to the community, they also monitor and interfere with the maintenance of her body and image. They “tap their feet outside the shower,” “tug her into Spanx,” choose her shoes, replace her as hostess and overseer of the kitchen (94). The Herot matriarchs regulate the image of Roger, also one of their children, by tying his tie, and “whip [Dylan] into shape” as well (94). Thanks to the work of the mothers, Willa can continue to appear as the perfect Herot housewife, ready to welcome the community into her home.

## Indirect Forms of Female Power

Because women, and especially mothers, in patriarchal society are not permitted to establish their bodies as sources of political power and authority, they must exercise power indirectly in the Herot community. Women are often the unseen leaders of events in Herot; the mothers, in fact, are often described with phrasing invoking images of powerful commanders, a “matriarchal unit” marching into “councils of war” (54). Often, they achieve this by using their husbands as proxies and figureheads; by leading their husbands on the path to power, the women are able to shape their lives and their communities into a future of their envisioning. In describing her mother’s method of manipulation in order to gain authority, Willa muses that “women like her are the reason men can live at all, running corporations, announcing wars”

(174). Women, according to Willa, “plot the course of the universe,” but they are only able to do this by helping their man achieve power and letting him take all the credit, putting instructions “into his breast pocket, like a note attached to a kindergartener, and sending him out into his day” (174).

Willa demonstrates this by orchestrating her mother’s plan to “make [Ben] a chief of police, and from there, something better” so that Willa may hold status and authority through him (173). Because Willa’s husband is the owner of her body, her body cannot betray him by becoming a seat of power. However, she can hold power if it is ostensibly portrayed as an extension of his own. Thus, though it is Ben who is poised to become “Mayor? Senator? Governor? President?” (221) It is Willa whose vision for the community as “a growing center of commerce, culture, glamour” is realized, whose plan to fill the abandoned tunnels with new trains comes true (222-223). The mothers, too, are agents behind Ben Woolf’s accomplishments as “hero” of Herot, discreetly slipping money to senators and attending zoning meetings to ensure the success of Herot Heritage train station. Secretly, these women are “the ones who make the world,” and they “rise” to success along with Willa, but their glory is, and must be, centered around a male figurehead (205-206).

One way that Willa ensures her husband’s success demonstrates another method by which the mothers and wives of Herot exercise power within the constraints placed upon them by the men and systems that own them. Hostessing is often a responsibility that Willa identifies with self-sacrifice and suffering. However, the role of hostess can at times be one that the women use in order to wield certain kinds of power. By inviting people of significance into the home as guests, women turn the domestic space, to which female authority is confined, into a public space where authority over public matters can be gained and used. When Willa and Ben invite

potential donors into their home for dinner parties, Willa is able to campaign for Ben's promotion and for the new train station, laying out plans for the community in between serving drinks and adjusting the music. Again, however, it is important that the plans appear to be *their* plans, not her own; Ben must be there to present these ambitions with her, legitimizing them as a male authority.

## Role of Mothers Under Patriarchy

Motherhood is perhaps the most important form of indirect power that women are allowed to hold in Herot. In patriarchal society, it is mothers who are tasked with the role of policing the bodies of their daughters. They wield this power on behalf of patriarchal authority, teaching them to be obedient and submit to the owners of their bodies. Mothers are required to regulate their daughters' bodies to keep them behaving properly for their husbands. They also regulate the bodies of their sons, in order to produce adult men that meet the expectations of the community and the standards of patriarchy. The mothers of Herot are responsible for teaching their children how they are allowed to use their bodies. They continue to police the actions of their children into adulthood, in addition to training them to police themselves. They must keep their children's bodies from becoming monstrous due to bodily eruptions.

Willa's mother Diane is vigilant about monitoring and controlling her daughter's bodily eruptions for the benefit of Willa's husband, Roger. She considers it her responsibility to make sure that Willa's body is properly maintained to fit the standards of the male gaze. Reminding her that she has a "man to keep," Diane points out "anything that looks like a wrinkle or spot" so that Willa may eliminate her body's imperfections (24). She warns her daughter often about the dangers of "letting herself go," reminding her that her worth as a wife is contingent on confining

her body according to what men require of it (56). Even before Willa marries Roger, Diane appraises what her body's worth will be to him, declaring that she is "still pretty enough" to marry a man of his status (23). She makes adjustments to her daughter's body to make it fit for Roger, instructing Willa to get her tattoo of her previous husband's name removed. Diane also sends her friends to deliver a "clenching device" to Willa four days after she gives birth, affirming the status of Willa's body as a machine for male pleasure, rather than a body that she can allow time to recover (24). Willa, however, already understands this about her body, and is "beginning to Kegel" even as the mothers arrive, despite the pain this causes her (24).

This latter scene also demonstrates how mothers not only police their children's bodies, but teach their children to police themselves. The self-policing of bodies is an integral agent of social control in communities such as Herot. The chapter "Docile Bodies" in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* discusses how learning and practicing discipline of one's own body leads to a society of "docile" bodies. From learning that violating social norms under the gaze of others leads to social ostracization, people learn that they must monitor themselves for transgressions and monstrosities, becoming the agents for their own surveillance and punishment. This means that members of society are not only bound to obey social norms when they can be seen, but at all times. Thus, teaching people to regulate their own bodies is crucial to the maintenance of a community under strict social norms, and mothers are the first agents of this education. Willa has already learned that her body's purpose is to serve her husband for his gratification and is regulating it herself; when her mother's friends arrive bearing the device, Willa is already "beginning to Kegel" (24).

Willa teaches her son Dylan to police himself in the same way. When he begins wiggling his loose tooth at the grocery store, she hands him a tissue. She commands "Now," and waits for

him to wipe his hands, which he does (25). The practiced way in which Dylan follows her orders suggests that this is not the first time this has occurred. She also mentions, during their outing to the store, that despite having a white car, she is not worried about Dylan making a mess of it, because he is “never sticky. He knows better” (24). Dylan knows the state in which he must keep his body in order to be acceptable to his mother and to the community. She also teaches him how to conceal his transgressions from others, warning him that sneaking ice cream from the store isn’t “for telling Daddy” (25). Dylan replies “nothing is,” having clearly been taught this lesson on multiple occasions (25).

The mothers of Herot also police their children’s bodies on behalf of the community of Herot. They must ensure that their children conform to the expectations of their community as well as their class status. This is evident in Diane’s interference in Willa’s life. Although Willa is permitted to live in the city for a period of time and pursue a career as an actress, even to have a relationship with a man that her mother considers unacceptable, Diane must intervene when Willa’s life in the city begins to alter her body in permanent ways that threaten to make her unpresentable to the community of Herot and undeserving of her class status. Willa can fall in love with a musician in the city, but she cannot allow this love to mark her body in permanent ways, such as getting a tattoo of his name or becoming pregnant with his child. Her mother is responsible for terminating these flaws and Willa’s life in the city altogether. She takes Willa to the dermatologist to get her tattoo removed, to the doctor to get an abortion, and home to Herot to marry Roger.

This is Diane’s responsibility: to “rescue” Willa from her body’s becoming monstrous due to its transgressions against the community (22). Willa’s mother is also responsible for orchestrating her marriage to Roger, a wealthy doctor and the son of the founder of Herot. In this

matchmaking role, she is in a sense caring for her daughter and her future, but she is also engaged in the reproduction of the Herot community, by creating proper families that conform to patriarchal expectations. She must ensure that Willa's body ends up in the possession of a man that is appropriate for her class status, and whose children will properly reproduce the community.

Women, and especially mothers, are regarded as being the keepers, and tellers, of stories in the novel: in the words of the Herot mothers themselves they are the "memory of the world" (151). The novel constructs this role as one of the traditional and most serious responsibilities of women, keeping records as innocuous as "family trees and... baby books" and as crucial as "the census of diseases, the records of divorces, battles, and medals... the wills" (154). This responsibility of being the keepers of knowledge ties the Herot mothers to the other collective voice in the novel, that of the voice of the mere, who is characterized as likewise all-knowing. The novel is also framed by a pattern of women telling other women to "listen," passing down truths of personal history and of universal knowledge (6).

The matriarchs of Herot, though, wield this role in a different manner. Making it their business to see what happens when the people of Herot think no one is looking, they become the keepers of secrets in the community. They then use their knowledge to plan for the future and to manipulate others in order to better their children's lives. They expose and exploit the monstrosities of others in order to make sure that their children remain upright in the eyes of the community. The mothers, for example, are the first to know of Roger's affair with another Herot man's wife, and upon discovering this they begin to plan for securing Willa's future with a "better man" (96). They uncover the secrets of Willa's affair with Ben Woolf, and use this knowledge to pressure him into continuing the search for Dylan and Dana Mills.

They are also the keepers of their own secrets and those of their husbands and children, and they use this responsibility to conceal the monstrosities of themselves and those close to them. Skilled in “the art of covering up a mess,” the matriarchs of Herot are the ones charged with hiding potential scandals from the eyes of the community (191). They keep hidden the indiscretions of those they are responsible for, cleaning up the evidence, from tying Roger’s tie to wiping Willa’s fingerprints from the knife in her son’s back. Their role as the tellers of stories is crucial to their power as well, allowing them to rewrite the narratives of their community in order to exclude the “horrors” of crimes and imperfect moments, or at least to exonerate themselves as part of them (270). It is Tina, Roger’s mother, who steps in to stop his betrayal of the expectations of the Herot community when he goes through a sort of midlife crisis, “crying... and using words like ‘existential’ and ‘guitar,’” alarming Willa (83). Willa’s mother and her friends wipe her prints from the knife in her back when she kills Dylan in a trance-like state, and take control of the narrative by declaring Ben, Willa’s third husband, as the killer. Willa also attempts to fill this role with Dylan, spending money on therapy and facial surgery after he returns from the mountain, not so much to help him heal from the events but to cover up the evidence which may make him unacceptable to the community. Mothers are responsible for “cleaning up” evidence, “swallowing” monstrous secrets, controlling and “spinning” stories in order to exonerate themselves and their children from crime and scandal (270, 192, 206). If they cannot eradicate the transgressive behaviors of their children, they must at least conceal them.

Through using this “feminine” role to its full potential, they are secretly able to hold a significant amount of power in their communities within the bounds of the patriarchal roles that own them. This ability is made possible by the fact that the men and communities underestimate the power of controlling narratives and histories, dismissing it as a trivial female habit, as

“gossip” (152). Because those who place limitations on how much power they are able to command do not recognize this type of storytelling power, the wives and mothers of Herot have the power of controlling the narratives of public knowledge, the power to see and “piece together” the story that they want told and to “write” the circumstances of events as the community will know them (270-271). They are able to police not only the behaviors, but the narratives around themselves, their husbands, and their children.

## Impact of Regulatory Role

This policing power makes mothers appear as “hated,” oppressive forces to their children; Willa views her mother’s gaze as cruel and ruthless towards her body, that of a “coat-hanger abortionist” (193). However, mothers do not hold power over their daughters’ bodies, but enact the authority of the patriarchy on them on the behalf of men. Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* figures patriarchal oppression of women’s bodies as a lateral process, enacted most often not through top-down domination on the part of men and social authorities, but laterally, through practice amongst women, education, and self-reproduction. Mothers are the first to teach women that their bodies belong to others, and must be maintained according to their standards. This means teaching the rules of eating and hunger, of taking up no space and holding no power, of what one is allowed to do with one’s body. Mothers teach practices of self-monitoring and self-limiting to their daughters, but it does not originate with them. They are victims of patriarchal oppression themselves, and are reproducing it into future generations. But because mothers are the enactors of this oppression, they become the “targets” of their daughters’ resentment towards oppressive systems (268).

Willa's mother Diane attempts to teach Willa in her childhood that restraints must be placed on her body and her needs. When Willa wakes her parents up with nightmares as a child, Diane threatens to "tie her into the bed" if she continues to wake up, prompting Willa to completely stop dreaming (85). Here, she teaches Willa that her body must be contained, her needs suppressed. Willa is not allowed to voice her experience or require anything of others. However, Diane imposes these restraints on her daughter because she has been subjected to them as well, and she has been brought up to think that women should obey them. When the matriarchs of Herot arrive at Willa's home before her party to find her family and home a "mess," they expect Willa to suppress her hysteria and perfect her facade for the party (93). They require this of her, however, because they themselves were expected to erase their own needs for the convenience of others - "once, we had to have an emergency hysterectomy and we said nothing" (93).

At times, mothers' enacting oppression can look like care: they are anxious about the fate of their daughters, and know what it takes to survive in Herot's patriarchal community. At Roger's funeral, when the woman he had an affair with loudly cries and throws her engagement ring into the grave, Diane instructs her: "Don't fall apart. Don't let go. Stand up straight" (137). In another moment, when Willa is grieving Ben, who she believes has died trying to rescue her son, as well as the loss of her life as a Herot wife, Diane wakes her to tell her that Ben has emerged from the mere with Dylan. She commands Willa to compose herself and play the role of the grateful widow and loving mother for the public. "Don't you dare make that face...This is your moment. Take it. Get dressed and take it" (193). In these instances, her mother's policing of Willa's body appears as concern for her daughter's life. Though Diane may look at Willa's body "with the gaze of a coat-hanger abortionist," making her feel like "a chicken on a slab, pink and

raw,” she believes she knows what is necessary for her daughter to succeed as a woman in Herot, and is bound to teach her the harsh realities of what the patriarchy requires of her (193).

Policing their children’s bodies is also a matter of self-preservation for Herot mothers. Because they are responsible for keeping their children from transgressions, they are blamed when their children violate the community’s expectations. When Dylan throws a tantrum upon seeing the dead rabbit Gren has brought to his doorstep in a garbage bag, believing that it is Gren in the bag, it is Willa who is subjected to Roger’s disapproval, as if it is Willa “on her back, limbs akimbo, mouth so wide that her tonsils are visible,” screaming (89-90). Because Dylan’s transgressions are Willa’s responsibility, in Roger’s eyes it “might as well be Willa” who is throwing the tantrum (89).

In Dylan’s childhood, we see the impact of these maternal teachings; Willa imparts rules of desiring to him which are meant for women. In one scene, when Willa and Dylan are in the grocery store, he “press[es] his face against the glass” to stare at the tubs of ice cream (25). Careful to make sure no one’s looking, she opens a container of ice cream and puts her finger into it to take a bite, inviting Dylan to do the same, before closing the container and putting it back into the freezer. Boys are meant to be taught in their childhoods to eat like men, to desire like men. Ben makes sure to teach the children he has with Willa how to “eat their meat bloody” (250). However, in this scene, Willa imposes on her son the rules of desiring and eating that are required for women. This exercise of sneaking ice cream in the grocery store teaches him that craving and indulging is something to be done in secret, when no one is looking, and in tiny pieces, never to satiation or excess. He learns also that the things he hungers for are not his, and cannot belong to him. His desires can only be stolen in small moments, with pleasure tainted by guilt. This might be said to have an effect on Dylan’s experience of desire later in life. At first

during his teenage years, he does not accept his desire for men. He has sex with women, which he describes as feeling like “nothing,” rather than pursuing experiences which will bring him pleasure (244).

Dylan mirrors his mother’s expressions of her sexuality and desire during her young adulthood, but he is ultimately able to reject the self-denial that she has practiced and taught to him. While his mother wore peacock feather-patterned fishnets, something she’d “never” do now, Dylan wears “leather pants, tooled all over with peacock feathers” while performing in a play, along with eyeliner and platform shoes, expressing a rejection of conformity and the patriarchal male image (20, 226). He also has a tattoo of the mountain with himself, Dana, and Gren inside it, much as Willa was tattooed with the name of her first husband. These similarities identify him with his mother’s rebellious desires, which she entertains but abandons in favor of conformity. Unlike his mother, Dylan does not change his dress, remove his tattoo, or disavow his desires in order to be acceptable to the community. When he returns to the mere, before the opening of the train station in the mountain and discovers Gren, he is able to break away from his mother’s model of desire and admit to him, “I want you” (248)

The mothers must reject their children if they become too monstrous. Although Herot mothers go to some lengths to protect their children from being labeled monstrous by the community by regulating and concealing their children’s transgressions, they ultimately must be loyal to men, to the community, and the patriarchy. Willa rejects Dylan when he refuses to comply with her efforts to “repair” him after his time under the mountain with Dana and Gren, and begins committing such transgressions as participating in protests, wearing eyeliner and leather pants, and acting in plays at school (226). His failure to be an obedient, conforming member of the Herot community, and his failure to live up to the image of the patriarchal male,

render him decisively monstrous in Herot. Willa's responsibility to eradicate his monstrosity is released. To her "relief," she is only required to do her best to keep him out of Herot (227).

When Willa becomes monstrous and succumbs to her hunger at the end of the novel, and is publicly exposed for killing Dylan, the mothers are also obligated to reject her and proclaim that "she's not our daughter" (297).

## Mothers Taming Monstrosity

The task of regulating children's bodies means making them properly human by transmitting culture to them and purging them of the abject monstrous. Societies such as Herot operate on the separation of nature, bodiliness, and animality, hallmarks of the abject, from culture and the human. Their self-identification as civilized humans, superior to animals and governed by culture and rationality, depends on maintaining the illusion that the body and culture, nature and civilization, and the human and animal can be separated. They wish to believe that people, or at least "people like [them]," are born civilized rather than animal (283). The role of mothers in Herot is to maintain this illusion by taming the nature of their children's bodies and training them to become civilized, human bodies, even as they must regulate their own bodies as women.

Mothers tame the monstrosities of their children's bodies, as when Diane puts heels on Willa to quickly ready her for a party. It is as if she is "shoeing a horse," turning her child's body from an unruly animal into a human being (94). Even at home, and as early as birth, it is mothers who are tasked with the responsibility of taming children's nature to eradicate bodiliness and animality. When Dylan screeches like a "bird of prey" in the night, it is Willa who must get up to quiet him (25). Her husband Roger pretends not to have heard him cry.

Their work, however, goes unacknowledged, because it is evidence that humans are unruly animals to begin with, and can become so again. Children, such as Willa's son Dylan, are viewed by their mothers as "wild animals" that need taming in order to become proper human beings, and must be monitored throughout their lives to remain that way. However, while to Willa Dylan is a "wild animal," the rest of the community sees him as "perfect" (43, 20). It is important that Herot is allowed to believe that its children are born civilized, into social norms and gender roles. They must be born innocent of monstrosity, so that the citizens of Herot can believe that they are innocent of it as well.

When children are transgressive, especially male children, it is the mothers who are monsters. In these instances, the mothers are implicated in more than simply failing to curb their children's natural bodily unruliness and turn them from animals into humans. They are perceived as having corrupted their children's natural human, civilized state, when in fact monstrosity is their natural state. It is unthinkable to Roger that Dylan could shoot a rabbit under his own steam and leave the grotesque trophy of its body on the doorstep for Willa to find, or even that he just doesn't like to play sports. It must be Willa's "feminizing" influence that deters him from living up to the patriarchal ideal (89). When he departs from civilized human behavior by throwing a tantrum, it is Willa who Roger sees as the monstrous animal, as if she is "kicking, thrashing, screaming loss and rage" (89) As it is put by a Herot man to Willa at a party, the young men of Herot are born perfect, full of "potential;" "it's the mothers who ruin it" (21).

Mothers have the responsibility of dealing with monstrous aspects of human nature that threaten the dominant social systems that own bodies under patriarchy. Mothers are stewards over the realm of the abject, acting as such in order to purify human bodies from the abject so that they can enter society and be accepted as human. This means that motherhood resides on an

uncomfortable boundary between nature and culture, between humanity and monstrosity. Their role is necessary for the reproduction of patriarchy and society, but it is also an uncomfortable one. Much as the “embodied” experience of pregnancy, as it is described by Rosemary Betterton’s “Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination,” makes pregnant mothers unstable and troublesome, the entrenchment of motherhood in the abject makes mothers precarious, and potentially threatening figures, liable to become monstrous at any moment (81). Thus, women and especially mothers are held to the highest standard of appearing human, civilized, with invisible bodies.

This is especially true because the humanity of all of Herot depends on the humanity of mothers. They are responsible for the eradication of nature, the body, and the animal within every man and woman of Herot, from childhood forward. If the mothers fail to tame even themselves, it reveals that the monstrous nature of all humans cannot be eradicated. When Willa and the matriarchs of Herot begin to transform into monsters near the novel’s end, it unravels the humanity of “everyone, all the people of Herot Hall” (295). Every Herot citizen is implicated in Willa’s monstrosity, shedding their human facades to reveal the talons, teeth, fur and hunger that’s “always been there” underneath the surface (296).

## Conclusion

Dana is on a Greyhound bus at age seventeen, traveling across the country after her mother’s death, when an old woman sits next to her and gives her a rock with a fossil in it, resembling a “tiny sea monster,” calling it a “miracle” (303). The stranger dies later on the ride, and Dana keeps the rock with her for many years, eventually giving it to Gren. When she is in labor with her son, she “clenche[s] the rock in her fist, feeling the tiny bones” (304). The bones

of the fossil remind her of Gren's bones, those "made by [her] body" (48). She sees the creature as Gren's "brother," part of the same "family," and feels a kinship with the "tremendous mother" of the tiny being in the rock (304).

Being pregnant is an experience that makes Dana extremely aware of her body. She can feel it making bones, her son's "hand pressing hard to [her] insides," and can see her "nipples growing darker" and her "belly button shifting" (274). Dana describes pregnancy as an embodied experience, as well as one that links her to the nonhuman world. Taking part in the creation of another being makes her see him as a body, a creature, made out of bones, the "brother" of a fossil, and if her son is a creature, so is she, his "tremendous mother" (304). Dana experiences pregnancy as illuminating the status of her self as a body and as an animal, going through the same processes as the creature fossilized in the rock once did.

The connection between motherhood and animality is a problem for mothers in Herot, because any animal-like behavior from women's bodies is transgressive. Animal characteristics tie them too closely to their bodily reality, rather than a doll-like ideal. The idea that women are animal beings, with natural instincts and needs that do not serve the patriarchy, threatens the conception of women as existing solely for male convenience. When Willa sees the link between her pregnancy and animal bodies, imagining her pregnant body as like that of a "rabbit" or a "seal," this is a problem, a link which must be concealed and eradicated by stripping pregnancy of its bodiliness (40, 193). Dana, however, is not restricted by the need to reject her bodiliness and her place in the animal world. She accepts her kinship with the mother of the sea monster as a positive, comforting connection, welcoming these creatures into her family. She equally welcomes the notion that her son Gren is a creature akin to the one inside the fossil.

In the relationship between Dana and Gren, *The Mere Wife* contains an alternative vision of motherhood, as a state which accepts monstrosity, rather than policing and eradicating it.

Many theoretical feminist works, such as Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," envision the mother and child relationship as one that begins outside of society, language, patriarchy, and the binaries that these systems invite, such as the self/other and the human/monster. A loss takes place as the mother is required to indoctrinate her child into patriarchal society, teaching them that they must be on guard against the natural monstrosity of their bodies. Conditions enter into their relationship of total acceptance, and the mothers have higher loyalties than to their children. Gren and Dana, however, display a mother and child relationship which works outside of patriarchal society. Dana does not teach her child that his body is unacceptable and must be changed, or kept in check.

Gren's physical descriptions remain ambiguous throughout the novel. At times, he is described as a monster, with claws, fur, and yellow eyes; at other times he is just "a boy" (28). However, whether Gren is strictly human or not, he is still an other to the Herot community and thus considered monstrous. Gren's father is suggested to be a middle eastern man, who Dana meets when in enemy territory as a soldier during the war. Gren is also described as having brown skin. Gren's being a racial other serves as an alternate explanation for why he is considered a monster, and for Dana's fear that "my son running down the street would be my son confessing to a crime" (238). His queerness is also tied to his otherness; Dana is equally afraid that "my son in love with the boy from down there would be my son hanging from a tree" (238). Other characters in the novel see Gren's otherness in the form of monstrosity as well. Having caught a glimpse of him in her kitchen, Willa describes him as "a monster with a long tail, claws, and teeth, a huge monster with fur, but also not—like a bear, like a person, but also not like a

person” (124). Dana also shows her son as a baby to a woman at the checkout counter of a store, and recognizes fear and prejudice on the woman’s face, confirming Dana’s fears that Gren is different and will not be safe in the world. Later, though, Willa sees Gren’s head in Ben’s hands after her husband has killed the boy, and she recognizes him as “just a boy” (294). The novel suggests with this ambiguity that it is Gren’s otherness which makes people see him as a monster.

For Dana, however, Gren’s monstrosity is not a flaw, but a “wonder” (28). Rosemary Betterton’s “Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination” discusses how disabled artist Alison Lapper refigures difference in photographs of herself and her son, Parys; “by drawing on myth and fairy tale, [she] creates alternative visions of herself and Parys as marvels and monsters” (88). Imagining Gren as a monstrous creature, a wonder, might be Dana’s alternate, “fantastic” way of conceptualizing his difference, as a queer person and racial other. She does not see him as a monster that she must reject; rather, his difference makes him “beautiful” (232). This failure to reject her child’s transgressions is much of what makes Dana so monstrous to the community of Herot. Because of these fears about how her son’s monstrous otherness would be viewed and treated by the people of Herot, Dana chooses to live in the mountain with Gren, rejecting the community and patriarchal authority, rather than rejecting her son. It is not simply her son’s monstrosity, but her allegiance to it, that makes Dana a monster as well.

Dana’s model of motherhood and femininity is passed down from the women before her. She traces her family as a matrilineage, thinking of her mother and her grandmother as her predecessors; she does not have the obligation of producing perfect patriarchal males to continue the male lineage as women from Herot do. This model of womanhood includes others who

appear to Dana in the novel as well: her “saint,” a woman with a candle in her chest that seems to follow Dana throughout her life; a woman on the bus who tells Dana “her version of the story of the world” and gives her a fossil which she later gives to Gren; and even nonhuman voices, such as the collective voice of the mere and its creatures, which observes the events that happen on the mountain and below (70, 5). This latter voice, which narrates chapters of the novel speaking as “we,” mirrors the “we” of the matriarchs in Herot. This opposition seems to code the voice of the mere as feminine, or at least inclusive of the feminine, and as an alternative to the model of being and womanhood that the Herot mothers represent.

These figures in Dana’s life, like the mothers of Herot, recognize women as the storytellers of the world. Repeated throughout the novel is the word “listen,” which these women (and creatures) say to each other before passing down knowledge and repeating stories, each their own “version of the story of the world” and its wonders (5). This model of the role of women and mothers is more inclusive of monstrosity, otherness, and queerness than that passed down to Willa, which involves a kind of storytelling that rewrites narratives to exclude “horrors” such as the monstrosity of otherness (270).

Dylan and Gren, excluded from participating in the Herot model of masculinity because of their queerness, are accepted into this alternative lineage of the mere world. They are able to be accepted into this inclusive model without being stripped of their masculinity. Dylan and Gren participate in the cycles of telling and listening. Gren learns by listening to his mother and passes on knowledge to Dylan, and Dylan participates in the telling after his death, as the song he has written, beginning with the word “listen,” is sung at his funeral (283). In the alternative model of motherhood and being shown through Dana and Gren, the mother-child relationship is a space in which monstrosity is allowed to exist. Being monstrous, flawed, transgressive does not

mean that one has to be rejected; as the voice of the mere tells the reader, “in some places, no one’s alone,” not even monsters (304). Dana and Gren’s relationship, and later Dylan and Gren’s relationship, provide opportunities for being monsters together.

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