Murderers, Whores, and Thieves: Crime and Violence as Acts of Resistance in Selected Works of Shirley Jackson and Virginia Feito

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Disarmingly uncanny, Shirley Jackson's body of work is expansive in its exploration of domestic horror, focused significantly on gender inequity. Jackson's work has also laid the groundwork for contemporary literature focused on women's gender-based body dysmorphia and dystopia. Her influence is evident in contemporary Spanish writer Virginia Feito's debut novel *Mrs. March* (2021). Feito, like Jackson, writes in a sardonic literary style, free of didacticism and the trappings of melodrama. Feito also incorporates generic horror and crime tropes relating to violence, murder, theft, and suicidal ideation, as does Jackson. Through parallel themes, characterization, plot, and writing style, Feito carries forward Jackson's trademark focus on the instability of identity and the fractured psychological and emotional states women characters experience as they navigate through the hostile patriarchal structures of twentieth- and twenty-first-century society, particularly within domestic and social contexts.

This paper will examine how various forms of theft, impersonation, and impulses towards self-harm and violence—in fantasy or otherwise—function within Feito and Jackson's characters' fractured identities, as well as how these activities are manifestations of the characters' fraught sense of feminine selfhood. The ways in which these criminal preoccupations manifest in *Hangsaman* (1951), *We Have Always Lived in a Castle* (1962),[1] and a small sample of Jackson's short stories, and the manner in which they are more thoroughly expanded upon and explored in Virginia Feito's *Mrs. March* (2021), reveal how fractured feminine identity results from internalized patriarchy, and the hatred and the aggressions women experience daily. Feito's novel, like Jackson's oeuvre, is mainly concerned with feminine identity, and the central characters of both authors' texts express their anguish and anxiety through acts of petty theft, real and imagined violence, and other indiscretions. Through such offenses the women of these texts enact a means of reprieve from the many personal injustices they suffer in a society designed to denigrate and defeat women.

Feito has disclosed her explicit goal to produce the same type of claustrophobic, dark domestic narrative of authors like Patricia Highsmith

[1] Hereafter referred to as *Castle*.

and Shirley Jackson.[2] Setting her book in a retro-future environment of New York City, Feito is successful in her attempt to write an updated domestic horror; her novel reads precisely like a slightly modernized and more nerve-wracking novelization of "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith," a short story by Jackson published posthumously in 1996's *Just an Ordinary Day*. The short story begins *in medias res* with Mrs. Smith entering the grocer's, obviously having "interrupted a conversation about herself and her husband" (Jackson 2017, 41). Feito also begins her novel *in media res* with a statement about the protagonist's husband: "George March had written another book" (2021, 1). From this initial sentence, the reader follows the eponymous protagonist Mrs. March down the streets of New York's Upper East Side and to a bakery where, like Mrs. Smith, she orders food for herself and her husband. Mrs. March is disarmed when the cashier, Patricia, whom Mrs. March sees as beneath her own status, states that she has been reading George March's latest novel. She is unprepared for her husband's literary success to intersect with her cherished shopping rituals and is further upset when Patricia remarks on the similarities between herself and the main character of the novel, Johanna, a sex worker who, ironically, is so unattractive that no one wants to avail themselves of her services. Patricia's observation that Mrs. March must have been the inspiration behind the character of Johanna is the novel's first inciting incident, as the comment sparks Mrs. March's paranoia around George March's disloyalty and that she is the constant focal point of judgment and gossip.

Later, a found newspaper clipping in George's notebook ignites Mrs. March's suspicions that her husband may have murdered a young woman while away on a hunting trip. As in "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith," Mrs. March's identity is immediately linked to her husband's, although Mrs. Smith is granted the first name of Helen, and readers learn her maiden name as well. Mrs. Smith's neighbour, Polly Jones, even insists on using Mrs. Smith's first name to talk to Mrs. Smith. Polly proceeds to outline the many reasons that Polly and the other neighbors find the entire marriage suspicious, openly telling Mrs. Smith that she doesn't "look like [she] belonged in this house, or in this neighborhood" (Jackson 2017, 47). Polly explains that Mrs. Smith and her husband stand out not only because they are older and wealthier, but because Mrs. Smith radiates a certain "ladylike" refinement (47). She insists that Mrs. Smith must indicate "some intelligence about this terrible business" (47)—the terrible business being that Mr. Smith is generally assumed to be the local serial killer, drowning unsuspecting women in the bathtub. As noted by Michael J. Dalpe, Jr., in "'You Didn't Look Like You

[2] "I love all these old sinister books and stories by Shirley Jackson and Patricia Highsmith and Ira Levin and Daphne du Maurier. Perhaps I thought the best way to read a new book reminiscent of this nostalgic style was to write it" (Feito 2022).

Belonged in This House': Shirley Jackson's Fragile Domesticities," the most unnerving part of the story is not the subtext that Mr. Smith is a murderer, but rather the horror that "Mrs. Smith's every action is subject to scrutiny and gossip" (Dalpe 2022, 45). Mrs. March's experiences are positioned in precisely the same way as Mrs. Smith's, as Mrs. March constantly feels dissected and scorned. Plagued by social anxiety and her overly self-conscious predisposition, even when she is alone and in her own home, Mrs. March anticipates being "greeted by an audience applauding her pitiful stupidity" (Feito 2021, 14). Like Mrs. Smith, who perceives threats, judgment, and mockery both within and without the domestic sphere, Jackson's women protagonists operate without a sense of fixed identity and occupy a liminal space where attempts to locate emotional and psychological safety are feckless (Angeloch 2021, 220).

The scenes that most significantly demonstrate Mrs. March's symbolic rebuttal to perceived personal transgressions revolve around the theft of objects or the destruction of objects belonging to others. Prior to committing her first public theft, Mrs. March, after learning from Patricia that she may have been the influence for the character of Johanna, desecrates and disposes of a copy of George March's novel in her own home. After she steals one from a box of books in George's study, Mrs. March reads "quickly" and "superficially" about the "whore from Nantes"—Johanna—who is "weak, plain, detestable, pathetic, unloved," and an "unlovable wretch" (Feito 2021, 16). Overwhelmed by the similarities between herself and the despicable anti-heroine, she thinks, as always, of what *others* will think: "the whole world would know or, worse still, would *assume*" (16). Again, this theme of an outsider view taking root in the protagonist's mind is prevalent in "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith," as Mrs. Smith muses that "people are beginning to wonder too openly. Everyone is waiting…" (Jackson 2017, 51). Like Mrs. March, who is more concerned with being exposed by her husband's treachery than the betrayal itself, Mrs. Smith hopes to be promptly murdered—murder being preferable to further pernicious gossip. After the thought about her reputation, Mrs. March clutches the book to her breast, smashes it against George's desk, claws out George's eyes in the author photo and rips the novel to shreds. Realizing what she has done, she takes off her pantyhose and stuffs the desecrated text into her pantyhose in order to transport it to the kitchen garbage. Upon encountering Martha, their housekeeper, as she is surreptitiously disposing of the book, Mrs. March experiences fear. Mrs. March believes that Martha is the real "boss" of the household and that, in fact, Mrs. March "should be the one cleaning the apartment" (Feito 2021, 18). This scene not only contains Mrs. March's immature eruption of violence and then its guilty aftermath, but also underscores the lack of security and fixed identity that marks the start of the

slow trajectory towards Mrs. March's psychological breakdown. Feeling neither appropriately represented nor respected by George, nor the "boss" of her own household, Mrs. March resembles many of Jackson's characters. Natalie Waite's mother in *Hangsaman*, for example, warns Natalie about marrying a man like her own father who will strip her of her identity, and Merricat Blackwood in *Castle* is easily undone by her cousin's presence usurping her place in the household. Like Jackson's characters, Mrs. March's inability to connect to others reinforces her isolation. Mrs. March, also like Jackson's characters, feels terror in common, everyday environments, as they induce "the panic and paranoia that descend[s] upon them when they venture beyond the dubious safety of their domestic environment" (Hague 2005, 74–76).

After this private theft and destruction of George's novel, the next theft Mrs. March carries out is of a monogrammed cigarette case from a beautiful young woman at her husband's book launch party in their home. Through the possession of one of the young woman's personal items, Mrs. March hopes to glean some of the young woman's beauty and elegance. After the act, she hallucinates, for the first time, imaginary cockroaches—harbingers of her delusions of domestic corruption and filth—skittering over the tiles. And yet when Mrs. March observes Gabriella's "glossy golden mane," along with "her wine-colored dress—stunning in its simplicity and exquisitely draped over her thin frame" (Feito 2021, 46), Gabriella's beauty both attracts and repels Mrs. March. Specifically, Mrs. March, a self-described frumpy middle-aged woman, feels threatened by Gabriella's glamour and beauty and as she looks upon the young guest she shrinks, "feeling gauche and exposed," as she is perpetually aware of her sagging belly, stretchmarks, and sagging arms, in comparison to the more stylish and elegant women in attendance (46).

Her clothing and possessions also play a significant role in her skewed sense of self as Mrs. March feels deeply that her possessions do not reflect the idealized—and, to her, requisite—feminine image of sensuality, thinness, and glamour demanded by a heteropatriarchal and ageist society—demands that she has interiorized. In fact, Mrs. March strongly suspects that, although objectively her wardrobe is "tasteful and of good quality," the manner in which she dons her clothing makes them "come across as cheap and tacky" (39). She believes this of all her personal belongings; however, it is especially true of her unflattering clothes as "everything was either too tight or too short or it hung off her, shapeless and billowy—*she always appeared to be wearing somebody else's clothes*." (39; emphasis mine)

Feeling like an imposter in one's own life is also a longstanding theme in Jackson's fiction, dramatically evoked in the short story "Louisa, Please Come Home." The story describes a young woman who, desperate to escape

the boredom of her middle-class future, leaves home then later returns to her parents, only to be rejected by her family who can no longer recognize their own daughter. In this short story, clothing plays a significant role as, while appropriating a new identity, Louisa simply picks out a suit and makes a few small adjustments and with "just one or two small changes like a different blouse or some kind of pin in the lapel," she "could look like whoever [she] decided to be" (Jackson 2017, 21). Unlike Mrs. March, whose physical appearance is overwhelmingly tied to her self-esteem and personality, Jackson indicates the ways in which accessories—a raincoat, a pin—can transform Louisa into looking like "a thousand other people" (21). One major difference between Jackson's characters and Mrs. March is that, despite their lack of integrated self, Jackson's characters contain whimsy and flexibility. Even a more intransigent character like Merricat from *Castle,* to whom this paper will return to later, has playful exchanges with her sister and adapts to different living situations, despite her initial hostility to life changes. Lacking in imagination and any shred of self-esteem, Mrs. March cannot improvise or be resourceful like Louise; Mrs. March can only borrow or steal the identity of others.

Prior to her cigarette case being stolen, Gabriella stubs out her cigarette on Mrs. March's carefully curated menu of caviar and crème fraiche blini. Mrs. March, though deeply offended, cannot decide whether or not to perceive Gabriella's obvious rudeness "as an insult to her hospitality," and is overwhelmed by "a desire to cry out about such a desecration" (Feito 2021, 48). This hesitation around searching for the appropriate response after a rude violation resonates as expressly Jackson-esque, since a similar moment occurs in *Hangsaman* when Natalie learns that Anne and Vicki—two peers with whom she is in a perverse, underhanded competition for her professor's affections—have ventured into Natalie's private dormitory room to snoop. Natalie, at first, cannot even comprehend such a violation—"I don't understand", she tells the girls, acknowledging that she does not even know how to react to this publicly (Jackson 2013, 89). Though inwardly Natalie concedes that the thought of the girls in her room is "abhorrent," she is confused by the "calm, guiltless [and] amused" manner in which the girls have confessed their violation, as if the two had "premised their visit on what must be a complimentary opinion of Natalie" (89). So depersonalized and disassociated is Natalie in confronting the event that, like Mrs. March, she struggles to locate an appropriate reaction of outrage, wondering if she should "show anger and demonstrate […] that she was not to be tampered with" (89–90). Natalie's sense of "being tampered with" refers to the violation of her private space, as well as her sense of self/identity and though she is unable to express this verbally to the violators, she does comprehend

that having one's things disrupted also disrupts the self, as Natalie's retaliatory actions later on in the novel demonstrate.

As Dominic Angeloch notes, there is in Jackson's work what French philosopher Roger Caillois describes as the "assertion of a nexus of disturbance between self-perception and spatial perception" (2021, 234). In Jackson's work, the uncanniness of feminine identity in relation to the outside world questions the state of a sense of home. Home is supposed to be, after all, a place of safety, the location where we "think, feel, locate ourselves in the space-time continuum, and this questioning is accompanied by a suspension of what we are talking about when we speak of 'I'" (233). Thus, in Jackson's body of work, conflict and certainty around women's identity is frequently bound up with ownership of or right to occupy one's space unmolested and undisturbed, particularly a domestic or, in Natalie's case, private space.

Therefore, when Mrs. March seizes Gabriella's cigarette case on the coffee table, compelled "by an unfamiliar impulse," and slips it into her bra, where the stolen object once again becomes wedged "uncomfortably against her left breast," her act of stealing is retaliation for Gabriella's breach of Mrs. March's self and domestic space (Feito 2021, 49). Breast to breast now with Gabriella's initials, her very name, if only through the symbolic talisman of the metal case, Mrs. March retreats to her bedroom and barricades herself there for the rest of the party. She smokes three of the stolen cigarettes and seethes over her belief that the unsavoury protagonist, Johanna, is based on her. She imagines the partygoers are "pitying her," believing that she is a woman "whose husband despised her so much that he based this dreadful character on her" (55). When Mrs. March finally decides to emerge from her bedroom, she imagines everyone at the party dead from poisoning. Though acknowledging that her unfounded desire for "some sort of revenge" has been assuaged through the theft of the cigarette case, she believes "they deserved worse," and plays out the fantasy of poisoning them all "with a dish of toasted cheese and opium" (56). In her imagination, Mrs. March watches them all dramatically collapse "all over her living room, then the silence, an odd peace after such a boisterous party, and herself stepping over the bodies in a stunned daze" (56).

This fantasy evokes the central—yet offstage—dramatic incident in Jackson's *Castle*, wherein Merricat Blackwood—a reclusive young woman who resides in her family's remote estate with her sister and invalid Uncle Julian—avoids the encroaching world through small rites and rituals. Merricat *has* poisoned her entire family—a fact that readers suspect but is not, in fact, revealed until the last act of the novel. Despite being a mass murderer of her own family, Merricat's alienation is conveyed acutely to readers, especially when it originates from the villagers, who scorn, taunt,

and abuse her on her weekly visits to town. Thus, it is understandable to readers when she reveals: "I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all, even […] the children, lying here crying with the pain and dying" (Jackson 2022, 20). As with Mrs. March's fantasy of poisoning a group whom she believes has treated her with contempt, readers can somewhat comprehend the generalized feeling of being targeted, as well as the misplaced desire for avenging some imaginary slight. This odd empathy is present in the reader both because of and despite the absurdly horrific yet comical tableau. This image of a person or group gagging and falling to the ground, frothing at the mouth, is a deliberate nod to early nineteenth-century sensation novels, wherein the then-new controversial poison plot, authored by and for women, was itself a crime (Helfield 1995, 163). While the poison plot scenario would continue to be a common plot device for genre writers in the mid-to-late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the women authors of poison plot texts, such as Agatha Christie, were accused of proliferating toxic messaging as both they and their texts' characters contradicted Victorian gender roles by creating titillating tales predicated on passion and poison.[3] The repeated image of families and communities keeling over from Merricat's poisonings in *Castle*, deliberately lacks any sense of horror or tragedy. As mentioned, if anything, readers identify with the poisoner rather than the victims.[4] This positioning of the woman poisoner as vindicated and righteous, along with the facetious tenor of these small vignettes, indicates that for marginalized women characters in Jackson's work, murder is a logical and fair means of survival, and not scandalous in a world where women are continually frustrated by thwarted attempts at independence.[5]

In terms of authorship, Uncle Julian endlessly recalls details and data—real or imagined—with regards to the event, all in an effort to write a book about the sensational case and to gain control over his experience of almost being murdered by his niece. As noted in "Speaking of Magic: Folk narrative in *Hangsaman* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*" by Shelley

[3] It is notable here also that Madame Emma Bovary completes suicide by ingesting arsenic and is the likely figure alluded to in the *Mrs. March* title. Flaubert's character study of the negative impact of popular cultural and feminine domestic entrapment are relevant insofar as Madame Bovary, like Mrs. March, is also grossly disappointed by her husband and her own lack of identity outside of patriarchal structures.

[4] See Susan Farrell's (2023) historical discussion of the links between poison and critique of domestic ideology in "Sugared Death: Poison and Gender in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*."

[5] Though not a poisoning, there is a similar story of a young woman murdering her family in Jackson's *The Sundial* (1958). Harriet Stuart, an original resident of the site of the future Halloran estate featuring in the novel, is suspected of bludgeoning her entire family in a Lizzie-Borden-style axe attack.

Ingram, the latter novel reads as a deviant, inverted fable, where the absence of patriarchy, lack of community, and the presence of sharp class lines reinforce the generational imprint of isolation and entitlement on the Blackwood girls. Thus, the interpolation of the novel as a fairy tale is "beguiling," as it diffuses "much of the tension around the end of the novel and recoups a morally ambiguous narrative" (Ingram 2016, 70). This is relevant as at the core of both the real and the imagined poisoning scenes in *Mrs. March* and *Castle* is not only the signaling of other genres—such as the nineteenth-century sensational poison novels, true crime, and fables—but the overwriting of these genres in favour of new modes of reimagining women's violence and contempt. In the case of *Castle*, the overlaid genre is a complex folk tale, and, in the case of *Mrs. March,* it is the domestic gothic. In Feito's novel, Mrs. March's spiral into paranoia and ultimately violence is aligned with the domestic horror genre as the author utilizes domesticity in a way that reinforces gothic tropes of the "familiar-turned-terrible" (Dalpe 2022, 44). Mrs. March's descent articulates the uniquely "gendered urgency," which cannot be disregarded due to "its interruption of expected [domestic] order" (44).

This disruption, and the presentation of domestic horror as a series of performative acts, continues when Mrs. March steals a second item. In this scene, Mrs. March shops for groceries to an endless loop of "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy," while women move on "an invisible grid—never colliding, never regarding each other as they filed past" (Feito 2021, 130). Both comforted and discomforted by this ordered dance of homemakers, Mrs. March spies a cart in front of a gigantic Campbell's soup display. She peers into the unaccompanied cart, fearful that the other shoppers will tag her, resigning her to wander around the grocery store "lifeless, in their stead until she eventually tricked someone into replacing *her*" (130). Within, she sees food items, but also "shockingly cruelly" a copy of her husband's book (131). With the "red-and-white Campbell's walls closing around her," she again, like with the cigarette case, tucks it into her body—under her armpit this time—and promptly disposes of the shoplifted book outside the store (131).

This scene, stylized to reflect the glory and despair of American-style capitalism and the domestic Gothic, circa 1950, offers a glimpse into what occurs when domestic staging goes wrong. If Jackson and Feito's fictional works challenge expected performances by "showing what happens when the social rituals of 'polite society' break down" they also contain the scourge of betrayal, as patriarchy simultaneously undermines and ultimately fails to protect women, in both the domestic and public sphere (Ingram 2016, 54). George March's novel, which contains his unflattering depiction of his wife—at least to her mind—found in a shopping cart of all places, represents

a violation of both her private selfhood and her domestic role. Another example of this occurs in the bathroom at a restaurant when Mrs. March and George are out for dinner. Mrs. March hears an audiobook recording of George's book "erupting from the speakers louder, threatening—'We know you're in there, *Johanna*'" (Feito 2021, 69). Nearly urinating herself, Mrs. March cannot escape George's perception of her as the grotesque Johanna, even in the toilet. George appears to be everywhere at once, overwriting her existence. The fact that on both occasions of theft Mrs. March has tucked the item close to her breast is also significant in that she attempts to bury evidence that threatens and devalues her by enfolding it into her feminine form.

Moreover, George's explanation of his depiction of Johanna also makes a significant contribution to Mrs. March's increasingly fragmented identity and paranoia. After the party, Mrs. March wants to know "which lovely part of myself do I share with the whore?" (Feito 2021, 59). Wary and a bit surprised by her confrontational attitude, George defaults to the standard response given by fiction writers when deflecting accusations of unflattering portrayals of loved ones—he admits only that he has blended "a mixture of qualities from many different women" and fabricated a composite character (59). George balks at being told to sit down and write out the precise traits and iterates his claim that he cannot perform the exercise. Despairing at this lack of cooperation, she communicates her dwindling sense of selfhood and identity, posing the question to George: "Why does it feel like she exists and I don't?" (60). To further underscore the domestic horror, instead of recognizing his wife's mental fragility, George claims that they are both exhausted and vacates the bedroom to sleep on the couch, ending the argument in a domestic cliché. Alone in their bedroom, Mrs. March backs away from the door as if "bracing for someone to smash it with an ax," in a horror-movie tableau, indicating—again through an imagined violation—that she is fortunate *just* to be alive, even if she is simply a minor, composite character in her own life (61). Thus her husband's lack of understanding and support increases her insecurity and propels her mental breakdown. George's glibness towards Mrs. March is similar in its patriarchal archness to that of Arnold Waite's, Natalie's father in Jackson's *Hangsaman*, towards his wife. Though Mrs. Waite indulges Arnold in his weekly literary parties and her domestic pliability allows him to enjoy an unfettered intellectual life, he tells Natalie he "never could have found anyone else so unsympathetic as your mother, and so *helpful*" (Jackson 2013, 10; emphasis mine).

Further elaboration on the theme of stolen objects and their relationship to identity occurs when—as alluded to earlier—Mrs. March finds a clipping about a girl named Sylvia who was murdered out of state in

one of George's journals. This discovery prompts Mrs. March to travel to Maine to investigate as she suspects George murdered the young woman while on a hunting trip with his editor. With her paranoia and mania in full bloom, she connives and charms her way into Sylvia's grandmother's house to interview her best friend, Amy Grant, under the guise of being a journalist with the *New York Times* writing an article on the incident. She is pleasantly surprised at how flawlessly her plan works, even imagining herself in her New York apartment inviting a *New York Times* writer into her own home and, in a fantasy of inward domestic benevolence, "offering herself a macaroon from a dessert plate" (Feito 2021, 226). After posing invasive questions to both Sylvia's grandmother and Amy, her pride in her interviewing prowess continues to blossom to the point that she begins "to believe in the possibility of a real article" (230).

Mrs. March's fluid identity and lack of core self enables her to become another person when necessary, to slip into character with the ease of an experienced method actor. Natalie Waite is also skilled at close identification with others and is able to disconnect rapidly as she has "ill-formed identity boundaries; she can easily shift her identifications and associations because she is fragmented" (Hattenhauer 2003, 106). Her ability—to be both perpetrator and victim—comes to the fore when the women's student residence experiences a series of thefts in the girls' rooms. When her housemates ask whether any of Natalie's belongings are missing, we learn Natalie has not heard about the thefts but finds out all at once by "everyone […] talking to her as though they knew her, even though one girl did persistently call her Helen and another thought that she lived on the fourth floor" (Jackson 2013, 98). As the conversation continues, Natalie realizes that "it would not look well if she had not lost anything, and second, was she not an obvious thief?" (98). Natalie does not know if any of her belongings are missing because she does not, in fact, keep track of any items besides her jacket and her various books. At this juncture, Jackson's presentation of the event reads as if Natalie is fantasizing about committing the thefts, rather than remembering having committed them:

> silently into someone's room, looking smilingly over someone else's possessions […] fondling jewelry, discarding whatever did not meet her fancy […] slipping the roll of bills into her pocket, stuffing the book into the front of her sweater, flinging the real lace over her arm as though it belonged to her and coming softly out of someone else's room… (Jackson 2013, 99)

Natalie finally stutters out that she has had some change stolen to avoid being identified as the thief and then thinks: "what murder am I helping to

commit; why am I here […] pretending that someone else has stolen from *me?*" (100). As she did earlier in the novel when her father criticized her, Natalie here imagines herself into an alternative reality in which she is under investigation for a murder. Utilizing a deeply protective interiorized self-narrative of a detective story, this tic of Natalie's occurs when she feels threatened, interrogated, or bewildered. Like Mrs. March, who uses and acts upon the counter-narrative of her husband being a murderer to cope with the unsavoury truth that her husband and the world secretly despises her, Natalie also evokes a pulp detective narrative from earlier in the text to survive. Natalie betrays her own guilt in this final section through the quite specific phrase that she is "pretending that someone else has stolen from *me?*" (100). This clause not only implies Natalie is faking her role as the thief's victim but underscores the fact that there can be no "someone else"—because she herself is the thief.

These thefts occur within the context of a larger series of "peculiar events" at the college, including, in the room beneath Natalie's, a young lady who slapped people awake in a somnolent state and then is swiftly locked in a closet (Jackson 2013, 113). The following night, with the girl "safely in the infirmary—word of thievery again spread through the house," the young women, without any evidence, decide another young lady is guilty of the thefts (114). The accused thief quickly leaves the college. An alleged Peeping Tom—who is suspected to be the den mother's secret husband—is chased away and purged from the dormitory as well. Other events include a girl found to have a sexually transmitted disease, two other students in a different house attempting to overdose, while yet another nameless girl dies of an abortion. Meanwhile, the thefts in the dormitory continue, which, considering the degree to which Natalie dissociates, suggests that the person responsible for the thefts is indeed Natalie.

The reader must surmise this fact and, like the detective interrogating Natalie earlier in the text, must conduct a calculated process of deduction and textual fact checking, along with a refusal to be distracted by the "category of […] narratively indeterminate events [that] produce epistemological uncertainty within the novel" (Dobson 2016, 133). By wading through this litany of odd and sordid events narrated in a breathless rush, from a distant third-person narrator and nearly omniscient schoolgirl perspective, the reader filters the events through the fractured sense of identity and social isolation that Natalie experiences within the process of being institutionalized. Not only does Jackson withhold the important information that Natalie is the thief, but through narrative elision and oblique reference, she also reveals her contempt for the kind of college that Natalie attends, whose motto is "theory is nothing, experience is all" (2013, 49). That is, within the context of these goings on, Natalie's thefts are her

contribution to the overall depravity of the college experience. Theft, it can be argued as well, while being an indication of a lack of fixed identity as in *Mrs. March*, in Jackson's work, is also a metonym for deep grieving and loneliness.

For example, in Jackson's "Family Treasures," first published posthumously in the 2015 collection entitled *Let Me Tell You*, a student named Anne Waite, who shares the same last name as Natalie, is acknowledged by the other students only because her mother dies. Soon, Anne finds solace in the purloined items of others. After her mother's death, Anne withdraws "into the colorless girl on the third floor who lived alone, had no friends, and rarely spoke" (Jackson 2017, 113). Unlike Natalie, who steals clothing, cigarettes, and money, Anne steals items and trinkets specifically associated with the characteristics of each of the victims: an ankle bracelet gifted from a male suitor; a pen-and-pencil set gifted to the student voted most likely to succeed; a stuffed teddy bear taken from a girl with "great wit" (116). Anne begins to steal personal, valueless objects. She cannot use, display, or sell the items, so there is no monetary value to these objects, which Anne hides in her mother's trunk

> under her mother's books and papers and the ancient fur cape, which was of no value but had become Anne's in the disposal of Anne's mother's private things, during which the bank holding all of Anne's money had, with the air of an impersonal machine humanizing itself through a sentimental understand of a small detail, sent it in neatly wrapped to Anne as a memento. (114)

It is symbolic that the panoply of Anne's useless collected thefts are stored in her mother's trunk. Like the detail about the cape being wrapped in a "humanizing" gesture—a cloak for the afterlife—the trunk signifies a coffin and becomes a kind of living altar that Anne creates for her mother. That is, like items found in an Egyptian coffins and sarcophagi indicating the status of the dead, it is as though Anne, who is repeatedly described as drab and quietly "borrows" the charm, intelligence, and wit of the owners of the items, infuses herself with their personality traits and lays them down as offerings for her late mother. Mrs. March does the same when stealing Gabriella's cigarette case and later Sylvia's handkerchief—both items marked with the girls' initials, which underscores how very attached they are to the identity of the original owners.

While Jackson's characters steal to memorialize, participate in social rites, and as an expression of deep alienation and subtle mirroring, Mrs. March's attempts at theft are a bit more self-serving as, when Amy invites Mrs. March to see the dead girl's bedroom, Mrs. March seizes the

opportunity to take some kind of souvenir, which, ironically, is a habit of serial killers. As Mrs. March pokes around in Sylvia's bedroom, inspecting her bedspread and makeup—a scene reminiscent of Natalie's dorm room violations—Amy directs Mrs. March to Sylvia's favourite handkerchief, trimmed in lace and embroidered with her initials. After pointing out that the item was not on her friend the day she disappeared, Amy turns away and Mrs. March pockets the handkerchief—again stealing an item with another young woman's initials. Just as she snatches the handkerchief, Mrs. March also observes that Sylvia's bookshelves are lined with George's books and, with cinematic clarity, they "come into focus as keen as a whetted blade" (Feito 2021, 232). As with the earlier depictions of Merricat fantasizing about mass poisoning, and Natalie imagining being interrogated by a detective, "unable to account for the blood on her hands" as her father denigrates her literary efforts, Mrs. March also responds to perceived slights and threats by descending into violent fantasies (Jackson 2013, 12). The books cement Mrs. March's suspicion that there is a connection between George and Sylvia as, like in Jackson's fiction, narrative and the physicality of books are a springboard to meaning and identity.[6]

Prior to leaving, Amy asks for the handkerchief back. This request is a reversal of the ending of Jackson's "Trial by Combat," wherein a young lady named Emily Johnson arrives home to her furnished room to find "three of her best handkerchiefs missing from the dresser drawer" (1944). Knowing her neighbor collects and hides all her possessions in "a neat, small pile," in the top drawer of the same maple dresser Emily has in her own room, the story explores doubling through objects (Jackson, 1944). Instead of exposing Mrs. Archer or confronting her with the obvious evidence of the thefts, Emily excuses her presence in her room and claims she is looking for aspirin. Emily, seemingly satisfied by this "orderly" curation of her personal items outside of her room, returns to her own room. Conversely, Mrs. March's interaction with Amy over the stolen handkerchief is tense as Amy demands it back. Mrs. March tries to buffer Amy's implied accusation by claiming she believes the handkerchief to be her own. Finally, suspecting Mrs. March isn't a *New York Times* writer at all, Amy asks Mrs. March her

[6] From the opening of *We Have Always Lived in a Castle*, wherein Merricat is venturing to town on her weekly library trip, to the dark yet hilarious scene in *The Sundial* where characters are burning books from the extensive Halloran library to make room for more quotidian post-apocalyptic supplies, books—as personal items, as metonyms, as talismans, as protective shields for characters—populate Jackson's work in a variety of ways, yet are constant mainstays as both settings and metaphors. In the case of Natalie, who registers them as her only necessary possessions, writing a book (becoming a writer) is her driving objective, despite her overwhelming suicidal ideations. Similarly, in *Castle*, Merricat believes she can channel magic and protect her home by choosing special words and nailing her father's books to trees.

name—"Johanna," Mrs. March tells the young woman, finally inhabiting the persona that spurred the whole ill-advised trip to Maine.

After her return from Maine, desperate to shed her identity as Johanna, Mrs. March begins to assume the identity of the murdered Sylvia. In her husband's absence, she purchases a similar black headband to the one seen in a photo of the girl, her brand of perfume, a wig, and even acquires peaches precisely the same shape and hue as those in the picture of Sylvia. Again, cloistered away in her bedroom, she takes to "becoming Sylvia" (Feito 2021, 250). She eats peaches, smiles in the mirror, reads beauty magazines, lounges, and smokes the last of the stolen cigarettes, "tilting her hand the way Gabriella did" (250). By merging the personas of the two young women within her psyche—one an object of male desire and one a victim of violence—she regresses to the origin of her trauma, a rape that occurred on vacation when she was an adolescent, which she had preferred to recall "as having happened to someone else" (169). Natalie suffers a similar sexual violation at a party thrown by her parents, and also describes it in an elliptical way, referring to it as "the day when *that* happened" (Jackson 2013, 37). Natalie is also unable to claim her sexual assault and sublimates it, which causes her further psychological fracture and a suicide attempt. Both Natalie and Mrs. March repress the experience of sexual assault, only for it to later harm their already-fragile identities. The casual, dissociative experience in both texts suggests that sexual assaults and their concomitant incidental trauma are an unremarkable part of growing up as women.

From rape, to institutionalized abuse under systemic patriarchy in which the male writers and supposed allies in their lives categorically overwrite their intimate selves and experiences to erase and disempower them, Feito and Jackson's anti-heroines undergo private and public traumas of various degrees. The women cope, or attempt to, through petty acts of stealing, and, as their growing lack of integrated selfhood and psychological instability increases, they experience total personality collapse. That is, by incarnating their trauma into divided selves and through acquiring the identities of others through small crimes—stolen cigarette cases, pocket change and handkerchiefs—items meaningful only to their original owners, they attempt to control their lives and fates. Through these small contrivances, they search for individuation from their male counterparts, another way of being, another self, even if it is stolen. Within the repeated and recycled scenes of theft, violence, and ultimately murder—both real and imaginary—the intersections of domestic and public life reveal the perforation of the fragile feminine character, whose secret shames and exposed intimate relationships further fragment their already deeply compromised selves.

While Jackson's works were written over fifty years ago, in another century, Feito's novel articulates the same concerns of elusive selfhood for women that Jackson described at the height of post-war gendered domesticity. Though her novel is set in a nebulous retro-future, Feito uses precisely the same coded metonymy and the imagery of the domestic realm to express distress around women's autonomy. This suggests that concerns about body, autonomy, selfhood, and identity have seemingly gone relatively unchanged and unmitigated by the social transformations that have emerged through second and third wave feminisms. Feito and Jackson's texts reveal enduring systemic patriarchal structures, which continue to entrap and undermine women as they attempt to obtain body and existential autonomy in an antagonistic society centred around men.

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