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Alice Munro's "Providence," Second-Wave Feminism, and the (Im)possibilities of Reconciling Motherhood and Liberation

The difficulties inherent to the reconciliation of late-twentieth-century discourses of second-wave feminist liberation with the physical and psychosocial demands of motherhood have been well documented by countless theorists, philosophers, and academics, from Simone de Beauvoir's landmark 1949 treatise, *The Second Sex*, to Adrienne Rich's 1976 text, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, to the extensive maternal scholarship generated and curated by Andrea O'Reilly over the past fifteen years. Patrice DiQuinzio notes the deeply contentious nature of motherhood within feminist theory, observing that "some feminists have argued that mothering is the source of women's limitations or the cause of women's oppression, because it is the experience in which women most suffer under the tyranny of nature, biology, and/or male control" (ix). More productively, she also asserts that "mothering is both an important site at which the central concepts of feminist theory are elaborated, and a site at which these concepts are challenged and reworked" (xi). In the context of second-wave feminism, which reached its peak in the 1970s, the conflict between motherhood and female liberation was perhaps at its most acute. As Adrienne Rich writes in 1976, "The twentieth-century, educated young woman . . . trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom" (160).

This discursive and often material binary, between the needs of children to be mothered and the needs of mothers to function as autonomous, individuated people, persists into the twenty-first century. While the theoretical, discursive, and material conditions of working mothers have transformed significantly over recent decades, the conflict women continue to feel between the obligations of mothering and their autonomy and ambition is arguably as pernicious and powerful as ever. As Daphne de Marneffe explains, "Women continue to recognize the impediments to earning power and professional accomplishments that caring for children presents, but the problem remains that caring for their children *matters* deeply to them" (16, emphasis original).

Alice Munro's 1978 short story "Providence" is one of the earliest examples of Canadian prose that explicitly explores the conflicts inherent to maternal experiences of feminist liberation.[1] While the story was originally written in the socio-cultural context of second-wave feminism, the issues Munro highlights related to the struggles of mothers who seek to free themselves from the personal limitations of patriarchal marriage and explore their independence remain relevant to contemporary women. Furthermore, Munro's short story, even while it contemplates the material and psychological impossibilities of feminist liberation and motherhood, still functions to open up an important and emergent literary space within which a previously inarticulable maternal subjectivity can be expressed. The seventh story in Munro's 1978 short story cycle *Who Do You Think You Are?,* "Providence" features the enigmatic, footloose, and independent Rose as its protagonist, and explicitly explores the inherent and ultimately impossible reconciliation of her feminist independence and maternal responsibilities. Munro wrote the story in October 1976 (Thacker 311), a few years after the dissolution of her own marriage of two decades (244), and it first appeared in the August 1977 edition of *Redbook,* the publishing venue serving as an obvious testament to the story's underlying thematic preoccupation with women's lived experiences and the liberative upheavals of the feminist movement.[2] The other stories in the collection capture episodes and eras of Rose's life, from her downtrodden childhood in Hanratty, to her socially advantageous marriage, followed by the birth of her daughter, extramarital affairs, and newfound independence after her divorce. Her career as an actress, romantic entanglements, and return to Hanratty in the final, eponymous story round out the collection, forming what Gerald Lynch describes as Munro's "masterful" and "only fully formed short story cycle" (159).

Curiously, "Providence" has merited remarkably little scholarly attention in the forty-plus years since its publication. In fact, it is easily the least critically explored story in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Lynch devotes a chapter to *Who Do You Think You Are?* in his 2001 book on the Canadian short story cycle, but limits his attention to "Privilege" and "Who Do You Think You Are?" (159). Walter R. Martin likewise minimizes the importance of "Providence" in the collection, arguing that while it is "successful," it is more effective as "a section" of the short story cycle, rather than "an independent story" (116). He concludes that it is "less satisfactory than the other stories" due in part to an "uncertainty of purpose" (Martin 101). I would argue, however, that the uncertainty he detects, rather than evidence of a faltering in Munro's literary skill, is purposeful and meaningful. Rose herself, at this juncture in her life, is deeply uncertain and unsure, of both what she is doing as a single working mother and to what extent she is (or is not) sufficiently fulfilling her maternal role.

A number of critics, particularly those who openly employ a feminist or maternal framework, provide useful and applicable insights into Munro's recurring treatment of the mother figure in her stories, even though they may not directly reference "Providence." Magdalene Redekop explores the "surrogate mother" in Munro's work, noting the proliferation of "stepmothers, foster mothers, adoptive mothers, child mothers, nurses, old maids mothering their parents, lovers mothering each other . . . and numerous women and men behaving in ways that could be described as maternal" (4). Elizabeth Hay notes that texts of Munro's "middle period" (encompassing *Who Do You Think You Are?*) offer up "many variations on the mother figure, giving us unmarried mothers, substitute mothers, runaway mothers, invalid mothers, and motherless or poorly mothered or over-mothered children" (186). While Hay never explicitly mentions "Providence," it is easy to see how Rose clearly fits into these paradigms of unorthodox maternity, first as a separated single mother in the throes of a long-distance affair with a married man, and ultimately as a "runaway mother" who sends her child back to her ex-husband and his new wife before she moves East to pursue acting opportunities on her own. Chantel Lavoie notes more generally that Munro's fiction has "always explored" the "ambivalence" of motherhood, asserting "that staying and coping with motherhood is only [ever] an uneasy compromise, not a triumph" (70), and that more often than not, Munro is preoccupied by "the dark ambivalence of the monstrous mother" (69), with stories featuring "maternal

characters [who] ache with longing for men they love, and sex with those men takes them away from their children, the fruits of earlier relationships" (71).[3]

And while "Providence" does include a fledgling, long-distance romantic relationship that Rose is eagerly seeking to maintain, the story is much more deeply invested in the quotidian tasks of a mother raising her child, and the conflicts and difficulties of managing life as a newly-single working mother. It is also the only story in the collection that focuses on Rose's relationship with her daughter Anna and her experiences as a mother. The other story in which Anna is mentioned is "Mischief," wherein her birth is somewhat tangential to the narrative, which is focused primarily on Rose's affair with Clifford, the husband of a friend she meets in the maternity ward. "Providence," on the other hand, chronicles Rose's efforts to achieve a precarious balance between her maternal role and her newfound freedom from her marriage, which has paved the way for her to contemplate new professional ambitions and romantic desires. In fact, it is precisely her struggle with these competing demands and impulses which drives the narrative, as Rose longs for autonomy, freedom, and erotic love, while striving to adequately meet the obligations of mothering her young daughter. The difficulty of reconciling these equally powerful and often disparate drives is captured in the persistent ambiguity and ambivalence of Munro's text. As Ajay Heble observes, *Who Do You Think You Are?* as a collection marks "Munro's increasing involvement with a poetics of uncertainty and a rhetoric of mistrust" (96). Munro achieves this through a variety of textual, narrative, and thematic constructions, from the sublimated fears and desires of Rose's dreamlife, to Rose's oscillation between maternal satisfaction and self-doubt, and the ambiguity generated by Anna's unhappiness and final declaration of being "fine" by the end of the story. Ultimately, "Providence" suggests that reconciling motherhood with liberation and self-realization—particularly in the context of the dominant, liberative second-wave feminism of the 1970s—is, in fact, impossible. Rose eventually abandons her attempt at single motherhood and, instead, relinquishes custody of her daughter to her ex-husband and his new wife. And while Rose's decision to effectively give up her maternal role in exchange for the freedom of personal fulfillment may seem untenable or unacceptable in the context of dominant, idealized discourses of motherhood, the struggles she encounters and self-doubt she experiences as a single working mother continue to resonate into the twenty-first century.

Theoretical, Maternal, and Feminist Contexts

The ascendence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s ushered in new personal, sexual, and professional possibilities for women's lives, the benefits of which women continue to reap into the present. The liberationist feminism of the second wave "implied a greater sense of personal empowerment and choice, adventure and sexual power free from prevailing ideas of what it meant to be a woman" (Hannam 147). However, women's lived, material realities, especially within the patriarchal family structure, often continued to remain constrained and fraught. Even within feminist theory and activism, "there was a general silence on mothering and motherhood in 1960s and early 1970s white second wave feminism" (Hallstein 4). This elision of and discomfort with motherhood was likely due to the perception that motherhood was deeply complicit with patriarchal structures of power. As Adrienne Rich observes in *Of Woman Born*, "[a]t the core of patriarchy is the individual family unit" (60), and within this family unit, "[t]he experience of maternity . . . [has] been channeled to serve male interests" (42). The mother, for Rich, is thus a potent figure co-opted into her own oppression. In recent decades, considerable scholarship has theorized the myriad ways women can and do enact feminist mothering beyond the bounds of patriarchy, most notably in the work of Andrea O'Reilly, who argues that feminist mothering becomes possible with the affirmation of "maternal agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity" (26). However, in the 1970s context of Munro's short story, many feminists were left with "a void or silence" surrounding mothering as a feminist, and how one might go about reconciling feminist liberation with motherhood (Hallstein 42).

The feminist discomfort with motherhood is not simply limited to the theoretical and discursive context within which Munro's story was written and published, but is, in fact, woven into the fabric of "Providence" itself. If, as Beverly Rasporich suggests, *Who Do You Think You Are?* functions as one of Munro's many feminist quest narratives, "primarily undertaken by the dominant persona of an intelligent and mature narrator who questions society's expectations of her as female" (32), then "Providence" can be interpreted—in the context of the short story cycle in which the text is immortalized—as a story that chronicles Rose's escape from patriarchal restrictions towards personal autonomy, freedom, and independence, while confirming and enacting the impossibility of reconciling feminist emancipation with motherhood. Rose's daughter Anna thus embodies the final, complicated

obstacle that Rose must overcome in order to be set free from her patriarchal oppression, which includes both marriage *and* motherhood. It is this form of social oppression within the context of the family unit which Rich vehemently rejects, referring to it as the "patriarchal institution of motherhood," rife with its own history and ideology (33). She goes on to explain that

> [t]ypically, under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother . . . will spell the "death" of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies *for herself*—especially when those hopes and fantasies have never been acted-on. (Rich 166, emphasis original).

Munro's Rose is, in many ways, a woman who has—prior to this specific short story in the collection—followed a traditional trajectory for North American women of the mid-twentieth century, from her pursuit of a university education as a means to escape the poverty of her childhood, to her early marriage to an affluent suitor named Patrick she meets while at university, to bearing his child soon after. Of course, Rose soon discovers, in the midst of this sequence of events, that she longs for something more. As Magdalene Redekop notes of Munro's feminist subterfuge, "no writer is more devastatingly effective at dismantling the operations of our patriarchal structures" (xii). Furthermore, Munro's short stories are frequently preoccupied with the multi-faceted and divergent needs and desires of her female protagonists. As Joseph Gold remarks, Munro "explores the schizophrenia . . . which afflicts the educated woman who seriously seeks to be a genuine self, a creative person, a loving female, a mother, a writer, an actress, a teacher" (12). In this context, Rose's quest for feminist liberation and self-discovery necessitates cutting the ties of her patriarchal bondage, leaving behind her identity as a wife and, ultimately, also abandoning her role as an active, involved mother. It is clear that for Rose, no discursive or imaginative landscape exists for her to mother beyond the confines of patriarchy. Rose's feminist quest also mobilizes an interesting paradox, since, as I explore below, part of Rose's emancipation necessitates the return of her daughter to her ex-husband and his new wife, Elizabeth, who embodies a very traditional, feminine docility. And while the resolution to Rose's conundrum may cast her among the "monstrous" mothers described by Lavoie, the conflicts she feels with such acuteness, between her child and her sense of self, and between her professional ambitions and her maternal obligations, remain resonant into the present.

Rose's (Im)possible Feminist Motherhood

Rose's relationship with her daughter Anna is foregrounded throughout "Providence," tinged with ambivalence and guilt. The opening lines read: "Rose had a dream about Anna. This was after she had gone away and left Anna behind" (*Who* 142). In the dream, Rose meets Anna as she is walking home from school, but when Rose tries to speak to her, "Anna walked past not speaking" (142). Not only that, but the dream-Anna is "covered with clay that seemed to have leaves or branches in it, so that the effect was of dead garlands. Decoration; ruination" (142). The juxtaposition of these two impulses related to her daughter—both decorative celebration and death and ruin—function to symbolize Rose's complicated mix of emotions, her maternal love, guilt, and fear. The *Redbook* version of the story opens with the same scene, but with additional details of Rose's inner reflections that were subsequently excised:

> There was something terrible about that crude, heavy head, like the head of a featureless idol. Nothing has happened to justify that dream. Anna is not dead. She is happy, I think. I don't lurk about the streets waiting to speak to her as she comes home from school. I live too far away. When I first went away . . . I didn't take Anna with me. (Munro, "Providence" 98).

Of course, even though Rose insists that "[n]othing has happened to justify that dream," it is implied that it is her very abandonment of Anna that has given rise to her sense of culpability. A form of guilt is emblematized in the mud covering her daughter's head, rendered "crude" and "heavy," weighed down with the burden of her parents' divorce, and in Rose's acknowledgement that in her departure from her marriage and the West Coast, she had "left Anna behind." It is also noteworthy that she only "thinks" that Anna "is happy," and that, in fact, she now "live[s] too far away" to know for sure. This distance is rendered both physical and emotional, leaving in its wake uncertainty and guilt. Her admission that "[w]hen I first went away . . . I didn't take Anna with me" is resonant with culpability and confession. Anna is given primacy in the dream sequence that comprises the first paragraph of the story, and as I will explore below, Anna's written words—and her subjectivity—also form the concluding sentences of the story.

In the three published versions of "Providence," when Rose asks Anna if she wants to move with her to the Kootenays where she has a job or stay behind with her father, Anna's response, "lying on the four-poster bed where Patrick and Rose used to sleep," is simply, "I don't want you to go" (*Who* 142). When Rose presses her, Anna calls her father to the room: "When he came

she sat up and pulled them both down on the bed, one on each side of her. She held on to them, and began to sob and shake. . . . 'You don't have to,' she said" (143). The symbolism of the marital bed, where Anna—perhaps conceived in this bed also—weeps and implores her parents to stay together, "pull[ing] them both down on the bed" with her, highlights Anna's distress at the dissolution of her parents' relationship and her mother's imminent departure from the family home. However, Munro subtly undermines the reader's quick, reactive sympathy with Anna when she describes her as "a violently dramatic child, sometimes, a bare blade" (143), while simultaneously legitimating Rose's motives for leaving through a recounting of self-harm. The narrator reveals that Rose has "scars on her wrists and her body, which she had made (not quite in the most dangerous places) with a razor blade," and makes an allusion to at least one incident of domestic violence when "[o]nce in the kitchen of this house Patrick had tried to choke her. Once she had run outside and knelt in her nightgown, tearing up handfuls of grass" (143). Furthermore, as Rose is "packing her trunk" (142) in preparation for leaving the family home, she reveals that it has always been her sublimated intention to break free from the chains of her marriage: "[S]he had always been planning, at the back of her mind, to do what she was doing now. Even on her wedding day she had known this time would come, and that if it didn't she might as well be dead" (142-43). Before even entering into marriage, Rose was aware—in however sublimated a manner—of the enormous costs of matrimony, to both her autonomy and her freedom; remaining in her marriage is likened to a living death.

Notwithstanding the narrator's admission that "for Anna this bloody fabric her parents had made, of mistakes and mismatches . . . was still the true web of life, of father and mother, of beginning and shelter" (143), Munro ultimately concludes that "anybody could see [that it] ought to be torn up and thrown away" (143). The foundational, parental relationship that has created and nurtured Anna's life, within which Rose is inevitably ensnared too, is rendered inadequate and insufficient: "What fraud, thought Rose, what fraud for everybody" (143). And in one of Munro's classically ambivalent and paradoxical twists, Anna appears to rebound quickly from her distress the night before: "In the morning Anna was cheerful, she said it was all right. She said she wanted to stay. She wanted to stay in her school, with her friends. She turned halfway down the walk to wave and shriek at her parents. 'Have a happy divorce!'" (144). Her "cheerfulness" and her declaration that "it was all right" and even her waving and wishing

of a "happy divorce!" for her parents are undermined by the fact that she "shrieks" these words, signalling intense and unmanageable emotion.

Rose embarks on her new life in the Kootenays, working at a local radio station, decorating her new apartment, and corresponding with her married lover Tom in Calgary. After Rose decides to bring Anna to live with her after the Christmas break, "Providence" then offers a myriad of details of Rose's daily life and struggles as a single working mother, juggling her domestic and maternal tasks alongside her new job. The narrative emphasizes the physical difficulties of her new life with Anna, where Rose's "heart would pound . . . from hauling the laundry, the groceries. The laundromat, the supermarket, the liquor store, were all at the bottom of the hill. She was busy all the time. She always had urgent plans for the next hour" (148). The physical effort expended, emblematized in Rose's pounding heart and her "urgent" busyness, captures the difficulty of life as a single mother, without a partner to help with errands or housekeeping. Munro outlines some of the seemingly minor but time-consuming tasks Rose undertakes on a regular basis, noting that "[b]esides her job, which was hard enough, she was doing the same things she had always done, and doing them under harder circumstances" (148). But notwithstanding the difficulties Rose experiences, she also observes that "[t]here was a surprising amount of comfort in these chores" (148). In fact, Rose experiences an almost paradoxical contentment amidst the chaos of being a single mother to a young child. The narrative details the necessary "hound[ing]" of "Anna into her bath" at eight o'clock every evening, bringing her a "final glass of chocolate milk," "mopp[ing] up the bathroom," "pick[ing] up the papers, crayons, felt cutouts, scissors, dirty socks, Chinese checkers," and making "Anna's lunch for the next day" (150). Munro highlights the minutiae of the materiality of mothering, from specific toys to be tidied every day to preparing meals. These quotidian domestic details are often those aspects of women's lives that occupy inordinate amounts of time but are rarely afforded the acknowledgment of literary representation. The "surprising . . . comfort" (148) Rose experiences is something she particularly enjoys after Anna is asleep and Rose is able to "settle down with a drink or a cup of coffee laced with rum, and give herself over to satisfaction, appreciation" (150). It is during these moments, at the conclusion of the day, that Rose is able to sit down quietly with a drink, and experience a remarkable realization of what O'Reilly describes in *Mother Outlaws* as "empowered mothering" or "feminist mothering," beyond the bounds of patriarchy, wherein maternal "agency, authority, autonomy,

and authenticity" are affirmed, allowing mothers to feel both fulfilled and satisfied (26). As Munro writes of Rose's evenings after Anna is asleep,

> She would turn off the lights and sit by the high front window looking out over this mountain town she had hardly known existed a year ago, and she would think what a miracle it was that this had happened, that she had come all this way and was working, she had Anna, she was paying for Anna's life and her own. (*Who* 151).

Rose not only relishes her freedom in having come "all this way," but she acknowledges the importance of her financial independence as well. Rose, furthermore, "could feel the weight of Anna in the apartment then just as naturally as she had felt her weight in her body, and without having to go and look at her she could see with stunning, fearful pleasure the fair hair and fair skin and glistening eyebrows" (151). Anna's material presence in the apartment is rendered as a weight akin to the fullness of pregnancy, both natural and beautiful. Munro's narrator observes of Rose's self-understanding in this moment: "For the first time in her life she understood domesticity, knew the meaning of shelter, and labored to manage it" (151). The "labor" Rose undertakes to cultivate the domestic space wherein her mothering is enacted also gestures, like the "weight" of pregnancy, to the materiality of birth-giving. Munro emphasizes the self-understanding Rose acquires, and her newfound achievement of a particularly feminist iteration of "domesticity" and "shelter," in which both are maintained through the fruits of her own singular labour. And while single-motherhood is not without its struggles, Rose succeeds in making a home—however briefly—for her daughter that is independent of the interference of any male figure, effectively free from the limitations and expectations of patriarchal motherhood.

This newfound sense of empowerment and maternal independence, however, is undercut by Rose's fledgling and unsuccessful attempts to reunite with Tom and, more significantly, Anna's homesickness and psychological distress. Not long after Anna moves to the Kootenays to live with Rose, Rose meets her daughter on her way home from school and notices that Anna's face appears "dirty," and then realizes "that it was stained with tears" (148). This is also the obvious source material for the dream which opens the story, further underscoring the extent of Anna's unhappiness. When Rose asks Anna what has happened, Anna replies, "Today I heard somebody calling Jeremy . . . and I thought Jeremy was here" (148). The narrative then reveals that "Jeremy was a little boy she had often played with at home" (148). In

order to try and soothe Anna, Rose takes her to buy a pet fish and offers to stop for chocolate milk. However, Anna sullenly replies, "My stomach hurts" (148), and their physical surroundings begin to metaphorically reflect Anna's turmoil, with "the kind of winter sunshine that only makes your eyes hurt, and your clothes too heavy, and emphasizes all disorder and difficulty" (148). While drinking her ineffectual emotional remedy of chocolate milk, Anna accuses Rose: "'You don't love Daddy . . . I know you don't'" (149). When Rose protests that she does like him, but that they just can't be together anymore, Anna insists: "'You don't like him. You're just lying. . . . Aren't you?'" (149). She then concludes "with some satisfaction," as she "pushe[s] the chocolate milk away," that her "stomach still hurts" (149). Anna's unhappiness is manifested in both her physical ailments, which Rose is unable to soothe, and her direct accusations that Rose and her apparent lack of feeling for Patrick are at fault for their current living arrangements and Anna being away from her friends. Anna's discontent is in sharp contrast to Rose's newfound sense of well-being, and undermines Rose's confidence in her mothering. Her emotional response to Anna's resentment is one of irritation, as she finds herself "on the verge of saying no, she did not like [Patrick]. If that's what you want, you can have it, she felt like saying" (149). Alongside her acknowledgement that "Anna did want it" is the attendant question of her daughter's youth, as she wonders, "but could she stand it? How do you ever judge what children can stand?" (149). The origins of her maternal self-doubt can be found in Anna's undeniable unhappiness with her new life.

Further challenging Rose's occasional feelings of empowerment and independence is an undercurrent of anxiety and unease about Anna's environment. Anna spends much of her time in the evenings watching *Family Court*, with its parade of broken families and wayward teenagers, juxtaposed against *The Brady Bunch*, with its idealized, blended family (149-50). Rose lets Anna eat dinner in front of the TV because it allows her to continue to work. She begins "putting things in bowls, so that Anna could manage more easily. She stopped making suppers of meat and potatoes and vegetables, because she had to throw so much out" (150). Some nights, when Anna wants cereal for dinner, "Rose let her have it. But then she would think there was something disastrously wrong, when she saw Anna in front of the television set eating Captain Crunch, at the very hour when families everywhere were gathered at kitchen or dining-room tables, preparing to eat and quarrel and amuse and torment each other" (150). Alone, Rose feels

unable to recreate the family life that she believes Anna needs, and that she is sure other people are enjoying. Even though she herself sought to break free from the chains and routines of domesticity, she acknowledges something of value and stability for her daughter in the life she left behind. The freedom and independence for which Rose yearns and ultimately achieves in leaving her husband and carving out a career of her own is—as it turns out—not quite the life she wants for her daughter.

In addition to Anna's own unhappiness and Rose's doubts about Anna's home life, Patrick writes to Rose to ask that Anna come home to Vancouver for the summer, and to let her know that he has met someone new, Elizabeth, and therefore wants to expedite their divorce so he can remarry. He describes Elizabeth as "a fine and stable person" (160), in apparent contrast to Rose, and then ventures to request full custody of Anna:

> And did Rose not think, said Patrick, that it might be better for Anna to be settled in her old home next year, in the home she had always known, to be back at her old school with her old friends (Jeremy kept asking about her) rather than traipsing around with Rose in her new independent existence? (160)

Patrick's mention here of Jeremy reinforces the validity of Anna's own feelings of longing for her "old school" and her "old friends." Just as Anna is missing Jeremy, so too is "Jeremy . . . asking about her" (160). Patrick's letter also functions to corroborate Rose's own fears of her "disastrously wrong" (150) single-parenting arrangement, drawing attention to her "traipsing around" (160) (an obvious example of which is Rose's ill-fated, aborted midnight bus trip to see her lover with Anna in tow [156-59]). The narrative stays with Patrick's perspective, as he continues:

> Might it not be true—and here Rose thought she heard the voice of the stable girlfriend—that she was using Anna to give herself some stability, rather than face up to the consequences of the path she had chosen? (160-61)

According to this patriarchal logic of the family's structure, "the consequences" of Rose's path towards autonomy and independence necessitate the relinquishment of her daughter.[4] The indirect discourse through which Patrick's letter is narrated further complicates the meaning Rose interprets, as it merges his voice with Rose's subjectivity. Rather than quoting him directly, Patrick's suggestions to send Anna back to her "old home . . . the home she has always known" (160) is refracted through Rose's own insecurity and uncertainty. Rose has internalized and accepted the condemnation she feels she deserves because of her choice to leave her role

as wife and (traditional) mother within the context of a hetero-patriarchal family structure. As such, not only must she consequently pay the price, but Patrick has found another more suitable, "stable" woman and mother to take her place. Here, rather than asserting her maternal entitlement and new-found feminist empowerment, Rose capitulates to Patrick's request. She finds herself unable to raise a sufficient defence for herself or her single-mothering: "Rose wanted to reply that she was making a home for Anna here, but she could not do that, truthfully" (161). Instead, she admits failure, and decides that the home she has made for her and Anna is not only insufficient, but temporary. She confesses that "[s]he no longer wanted to stay [in the Kootenays]. The charm, the transparency, of this town was gone for her" (161). Furthermore, "The pay was poor. She would never be able to afford anything but this cheap apartment. She might never get a better job, or another lover" (161). Here, Rose admits to her desire for a romantic relationship and confirms the financial hardship she is experiencing, which is also alluded to earlier in the narrative by descriptions of the "stained and shabby" apartment she rents, with its wallpaper "ripping and curling away from the baseboard" (144). For the first time, she admits that she is "thinking of going east, to Toronto, trying to get a job there, with a radio or television station, perhaps even some acting jobs" (161). She reveals her professional ambitions to develop her career as an actress, something only possible in a larger city. However, she acknowledges also that "[s]he wanted to take Anna with her, set them up again in some temporary shelter. It was just as Patrick said. She wanted to come home to Anna, to fill her life with Anna" (161). Rose expresses her maternal desire to have her daughter close; however, she is also forced to admit to herself that "[s]he didn't think Anna would choose that life. Poor, picturesque, gypsying childhoods are not much favored by children, though they will claim to value them, for all sorts of reasons, later on" (161). Ultimately, Rose decides that the life she wants for herself as a single, independent, liberated woman is incompatible with her perceptions of Anna's needs and expectations. Rather than having confidence in her ability to sufficiently mother Anna (however unconventionally) or adapting her life's plans to accommodate the needs of her daughter, Rose chooses to relinquish Anna to the very patriarchal family structure she herself was so desperate to escape.

And so, Anna goes "to live with Patrick and Elizabeth," where she begins "to take drama and ballet lessons" because "Elizabeth thought she should have some accomplishments, and keep busy" (161). Anna is given

her parents' old "four-poster bed, with a new canopy" (161). Patrick and Elizabeth also give her a kitten—a pet that Rose was unable to get for her because of the rental prohibitions in her apartment, and which she attempted to replicate by buying a pet fish instead. Further, Munro emphasizes Elizabeth's domesticity by having her make Anna a nightgown and cap to match the bed. As if to rub in the image of domestic bliss, Anna's father and her new stepmother send Rose a picture of Anna "sitting there, with the kitten, looking demure and satisfied in the midst of all the flowered cloth" (161).[5] In light of the brief feminist empowerment Rose experienced in the Kootenays as a single mother, her relinquishing of her only daughter to patriarchy's comforting embrace with all the stereotypical trappings of girlhood—from ballet to flowery bedding and clothing—is deeply paradoxical and problematic. As Beverly Rasporich observes, "If the reader does not find Rose particularly likeable at this point in her life, it is because ambition, by its very nature, admits only selfness, and, as Rose is learning, the freedom to do, unencumbered, exacts a price" (65). Rose is unable to fulfill her desire for independence and autonomy while continuing to mother Anna, at least within the confines of available social discourses which inflect and limit her understanding of motherhood. While she is able to envision a feminist future for herself—moving east to Toronto, cultivating a career as an actress—she is unable to successfully sustain the practice of feminist mothering which she glimpsed on those snowy evenings while Anna slept and she relished her new-found independence.

Part of this difficulty lies within feminist discourse itself, which privileges "individualism in order to articulate its claims that women are equal human subjects of social and political agency and entitlement" (DiQuinzio xii). This ideal of individualism is decidedly at odds with the material obligations of maternity, particularly hegemonic conceptions of motherhood, which DiQuinzio refers to as "essential motherhood," as that which "requires women's exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children" and which is founded on women's supposedly innate "psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and self-sacrifice" (xiii). As such, for DiQuinzio, "feminism has found it impossible to theorize mothering adequately in terms of an individualist theory of subjectivity" (xii). Rose and her choice to give custody of Anna to her ex-husband and his new "fine and stable" wife (*Who* 160) emblematizes the impossibility of reconciling this particular iteration of feminist, autonomous selfhood that Rose seeks to enact in her newly single

life with traditional conceptions of her maternal role. Rose is ultimately unable to escape what she perceives as a binary choice, relinquishing her motherhood in exchange for her freedom.

After Anna returns to her father, "Rose set to work cleaning out the apartment, finding marbles and drawings and some letters by Anna begun—mostly at Rose's instigation—and never finished, never mailed" (161). [6] They read: "Dear Daddy, I am fine. Are you? I was sick but I am fine now" (162); and, "Dear Jeremy, How tall are you now? I am fine" (162). In the final scene, we are given Anna's voice, and Anna's subjectivity, in epistolary form, disrupting Rose's narrative consciousness and reinforcing her maternal identity precisely at the moment that she has materially abandoned it. Furthermore, the conclusion of the story with the thrice repeated phrase from Anna, "I am fine," invites a multiplicity of paradoxical interpretations. On one hand, it provides a direct correlation between Anna and her new stepmother, Elizabeth, who Patrick also describes as "fine" (160), signalling an affinity between them. Furthermore, Anna's letter to her friend Jeremy, whose memory provoked tears and sadness, corroborates Rose's sense of Anna's loneliness and unhappiness with her, even while she declares herself "fine." On the other hand, though, her repetition of "I am fine" can perhaps be taken at face value, a reassuring balm for Rose's inarticulable maternal guilt and a revelation that perhaps Rose's abandoned attempt at feminist mothering had sown within it the potential for long-term happiness. Perhaps Anna *was* fine while she was living with Rose, and Rose had capitulated too easily to Patrick's custody request. Either way, the extent of Anna's "fineness," either while she lived with her mother or now with her father and stepmother, is never resolved. As Ildikó de Papp Carrington writes, "[Munro's] fiction is often intensely uncomfortable to read. The final emotional residue that many of her stories leave behind . . . is a lingering sense of unresolved ambiguity and dismayed unease" (5). The unsettling and unsettled conclusion to "Providence" functions to reflect Rose's own unspoken ambivalence about her decision to leave her daughter behind, as well as the almost universal, societal condemnation of mothers who abandon or choose not to care for their own children. With Rose's admitted plans to move "east, to Toronto" (*Who* 161), any possibility of joint custody is foreclosed. However, Munro's decision to centre Anna's voice in the final lines of the story suggests the inescapability of maternity. Though Rose can choose personal freedom and geographical mobility, giving over custody of her daughter in the process, she will always be Anna's mother.

Conclusion

"Providence" captures something of the tenuous and exquisite experience of mothering a small child, its difficulties and sacrifices, and the equally painful and (still) unspeakable choice to leave one's maternal role behind. Rose ultimately chooses feminist liberation over motherhood, unable to reconcile her desire for personal autonomy, professional ambition, and freedom from the patriarchal family with her perception of her daughter's need to be mothered. Her decision to relinquish Anna into the familiar care of her ex-husband Patrick and his new "fine and stable" wife is further motivated by her belief that she is doing what is best for Anna and affirmed by the concluding lines of the narrative, wherein Anna attests—in her own voice—to being "fine." In the end, Rose is unable, within the discursive context of second-wave feminism, to imagine and enact motherhood alongside her own journey toward feminist liberation. She is caught in the discursive binary that posits autonomy and maternity as antithetical, and ultimately chooses her own freedom.

NOTES

1 Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) is another significant feminist quest narrative that predates "Providence" and features a protagonist who is a single mother to an only daughter.

2 A third version of the story appears in the US edition of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which was retitled *The Beggar Maid* (1979) for the American market. The three versions of "Providence" share the same title and plot—in fact, most of the narrative remains largely unaltered—but some character names are modified, along with the narrative point of view (the original "Providence" from *Redbook* is written in the first person, whereas the final, collected versions are in the third person, which arguably permits a more ironic narrative distance). Helen Hoy provides an in-depth exploration of Munro's editorial process in her 1989 article on the compilation of the stories of *Who Do You Think You Are?* Unless otherwise indicated, I quote from the version of the story that is the most frequently cited and reproduced Canadian edition of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

3 Munro's 1997 short story "The Children Stay" also features a mother protagonist who abandons her children, although under decidedly more sordid and uncompromising circumstances. "The Children Stay" features Pauline as its protagonist, a married mother of two young daughters who is engaged in an adulterous affair and who impulsively leaves her very young children in order to run off with her lover. The story is distinct, however, in that Pauline is clearly motivated by a powerful sexual passion, whereas Rose is plagued more by a self-perceived inability to adequately nurture her daughter as a single mother alongside her nascent professional ambitions. Pauline also never attempts to continue mothering her children after leaving her marriage as Rose does—rather, she decides decisively to absent herself, likening her marriage and motherhood to "[a] sack over her

head" (*Love* 246). Pauline is making a clear choice between her children and her lover, whereas Rose is seeking a more open-ended personal freedom.

4 The scorned husband of "The Children Stay" issues a similar, albeit far more direct and devastating edict to his unfaithful wife upon her confession of her affair and her decision to leave him, telling her in a "shivering and vindictive voice" that "'[t]he children stay . . . Pauline. Did you hear me? . . . Remember. The children stay'" (*Love* 245). This final and definitive declaration also, of course, forms the title of the story itself.

5 The version of the story that appears in *The Beggar Maid* concludes with this exact sentence, of a "demure and satisfied" Anna "in the midst of all that flowered cloth" (*Beggar* 155). The *Redbook* version also captures a similar vision, of Anna living with her father and step-mother, where she "takes drama and ballet lessons, has a collection of splendid stuffed animals in her room" ("Providence" 163).

6 This ending is a significant departure from both the *Redbook* and *The Beggar Maid* versions. In the *Redbook* ending, Rose wonders about the current occupants of her old apartment: "I wonder if the wallpaper is the same, if the heat will be any better this winter. Who is living there now? Students, maybe; or a working mother and a child, making a stab at being a family" ("Providence" 163). It is decidedly more sombre and less ambiguous, a reminiscence of an attempt at creating a home that clearly did not succeed, while emphasizing its impoverishment by conjuring once again the peeling wallpaper and poor heat. The conclusion that appears in *The Beggar Maid* is—as I describe in the previous note—similarly definitive, as it ends simply with a contented Anna in a stereotypically girlish bedroom (*Beggar* 155). Here, there is no uncertainty about Anna's current happiness, further affirming and confirming Rose's decision to leave Anna with her father.

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