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Madness and Misogyny  
in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Daniel J. Vitkus

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Much Madness is divinest Sense—  
To a discerning Eye—  
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—  
'Tis the Majority  
In this, as All, prevail—  
Assent—and you are sane—  
Demur—you're straightway dangerous—  
And handled with a Chain—  
Emily Dickinson

...through the mediation of madness, it is the world that becomes culpable...in relation to the work of art; it is now arraigned by the work of art, obliged to order itself by its language, compelled by it to a task of recognition, of reparation, to the task of restoring reason *from* that unreason and *to* that unreason. The madness in which the work of art is engulfed is the space of our enterprise, it is the endless path to fulfillment, it is our mixed vocation of apostle and exegete....

Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*

Michel Foucault has demonstrated in his *Madness and Civilization* that by examining closely the discourses that have defined reason against unreason, we can see how the construction of madness has served various social and political functions. Foucault's study refers primarily to early modern Europe, but the historical paradigm that he identifies continues to express itself today. In the ideological state apparatuses of this century, we still see how the discourse of reason and order work to denounce and confine those who refuse to conform to "reason."

Many of the representations of madness that Foucault describes in his study come from literary sources, such as Sebastian Brant's

*Ship of Fools* or Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. These texts represent madness as a body and a voice that expresses a truth-telling protest against the dominant order of things. If society itself is crazy, false, unjust—then the voice of madness becomes the voice of sanity, and the binary of reason-unreason is subverted. In this essay, I will take Foucault's critique of reason as a starting point for an analysis of Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a text that represents madness as a construct that serves the hegemonic ideology of American capitalism.

Kesey's first-person narrative (first published in 1962) reveals, through the mind of Chief Bromden, the enclosed world of a ward in a state mental hospital in Oregon. The ward's mental patients are victims of a society that demands conformity to what Bromden calls "the Combine," a term suggesting a huge machine as well as a kind of socio-economic conspiracy. According to the Chief, the Combine is slowly but surely turning society into a dehumanized, homogenized culture in which each person is "a functioning, adjusted component".<sup>1</sup> The ward itself is one of the places where those who do not conform end up. It is "a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches..."(40). The Combine is clearly an imaginative construct that describes the dominant social order in America during the 1950s.

The ward is run by Nurse Ratched, who controls the process of turning men into machines. This process of transforming the patients into obedient automatons involves the loss of their sexuality, their masculinity, and their individuality. The Chief tells the story of his own deliverance from the Big Nurse, an escape which takes place as a result of the arrival on the ward of a patient named Randle Patrick McMurphy. The Chief bears witness to the battle of wills between McMurphy and the Big Nurse, a struggle which concludes in the sacrifice of McMurphy, the salvation of the men on the ward, and the escape of Chief Bromden.

Kesey's novel contains, in its description of the Combine, a powerful critique of American society and of the function of madness in that society. In many ways, the text conforms to the structure of conventional male myth and asks the reader to accept that myth as a heroic pattern. From a masculinist perspective, it offers a charismatic hero in McMurphy, a figure of spiritual strength and sexual energy, whose laughter restores the men to life and confounds the Combine's machines. However, the struggle between McMurphy and Nurse

Ratched is based upon a construction of gender that many critics have seen as crudely misogynistic.<sup>2</sup> The text celebrates a “natural” maleness which is placed in opposition to a domineering, emasculating representation of the feminine. The central figure in this construction of the feminine is the Big Nurse, an evil mother who wishes to keep and control her little boys (the men on the ward) under her system of mechanical surveillance and mind control. She is not a lone tyrant, however. As the Chief points out, “...it’s not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it’s the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that’s the really big force, and the nurse is just a high-ranking official for them” (165).

With the Big Nurse as the microcosmic manifestation of the Combine, resistance to the Combine becomes a struggle of a male community against the women that oppress them. As Robert Forrey points out, “The premise of the novel is that women ensnare, emasculate, and, in some cases, crucify men”(224). The events at the end of the novel confirm the text’s masculinist perspective, leaving the reader with a disturbing sense that McMurphy’s sacrifice is necessary in order to carry out the ritual violation of the Mother-Nurse that is demanded by the male community of the ward. In my account of the text, I want to explore the complex relationship in the text between its counter-cultural message, its male myths of initiation and sacrifice, and its representation of male naturalness.

But first, in order to contextualize and theorize my discussion of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, I want to return to Foucault’s archaeology of madness and civilization as my starting point. What Foucault says in the “Preface” of his book is helpful in understanding Kesey’s representation of the mental ward:

We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness...In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman:...the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity. (ix-x)

It is just this sense of alienation and confinement that Kesey explores through the eyes of his first-person narrator, Chief Bromden. The Chief recounts the story as a flashback, but tells the reader that his mind is still not "clear": his memories of madness are reported with all the distortions of reality that accompanied his original perception of those events. Although his account is "crazy," the Chief's narrative offers—through the media of hallucination, dream, and reverie—an imagery and a language which communicates, metaphorically, an alternative vision to that enforced by "the merciless language of non-madness."

Kesey's interest in two forms of abnormal consciousness—the one produced by madness and the other by hallucinatory drugs—is expressed in the novel. Kesey had direct experience of both. In the early 60s, as a resident of the Perry Lane counter-cultural community near San Francisco, Kesey used drugs like marijuana, peyote, and LSD to stimulate his imagination. He also volunteered for drug experiments at the Veteran's Hospital in Menlo Park, California. Some of the novel is based on drafts that were written while using such drugs. At about the same time, Kesey worked as a psychiatric aide at the Veteran's Hospital.<sup>3</sup> The novel is partly a product of these experiences, and it reflects a sense that an unconventional vision, outside of "straight," sane thinking, could provide a pathway to freedom from the psychic impoverishment of mainstream culture.

To speak in a discourse outside of "abstract reason" has been a common strategy of the artist who wishes to communicate his or her dissent against the dominant regime. From the Ancient Greeks to Shakespeare's drama to modern narrators such as Faulkner's Darl in *As I Lay Dying*, the discourse of unreason has raised its voice against an unjust "system." There has always been a link between madness and creativity: artistic genius sometimes expresses itself in an iconoclastic impulse which contemporaries identify as madness, and the most forcefully radical art diverges from the cultural and artistic norms manifested in a received, rational tradition. Artists have often found an inspiration that was described as a form of madness—possession by the muse, the "poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling," the visions of William Blake, Christopher Smart, and Vincent Van Gogh. Furthermore, the representation of madness in art is often linked to a creative energy and to the possession of a divine insight, prophecy, or inspiration—the fool or madman, who is "touched" by God. Madmen such as Lear or Don Quixote speak a truth which

threatens the dominant powers and their systems of social organization.

For those who are pushed beyond reason, madness can be the experience of an excess of meaning—"the world is too much with them." It can be the result of a hypersensitivity, or an acute awareness of a deep and terrible truth. The interpreter becomes overloaded with his or her vision of the world. Kesey's Chief is one of these people. Before the arrival of McMurphy, the Chief describes himself hidden in a fog of fear and madness, withdrawn into his imagination, pretending to be deaf and dumb. After fifteen years inside the ward, he can no longer communicate externally using the language of reason; he has become socially dysfunctional. The seeing "I" of the narrator has seen too much: he has seen the government take away the land from his tribe; he has seen his father destroyed by that; and he has seen the horror of war. His vision has turned inward, and it is to this insight that the reader has access through the Chief's narration.

The Chief communicates with the reader by translating his past madness into present narrative. This narration of madness, with its hallucination, anachrony, and illogic, offers an alternative, critical perspective on the way that American society functions. When the Chief begins to retell the story of McMurphy, he realizes that what he remembers is "crazy," but he asserts that it is nonetheless "true":

It's gonna burn me just that way, finally telling about all this, about the hospital, and her, and the guys—and about McMurphy. I been silent so long now its gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling you this is ranting and raving my God; you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But, please. It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen. (13)

From the very beginning of the novel, Kesey questions the conventional notion of what is "crazy" and what is not. When McMurphy hears Harding describe himself and the men as rabbits, and the Nurse as a wolf, he tells Harding that he is "talking like a crazy man" (61). Harding responds with mockery:

"Like a crazy man? How astute."

"...I didn't mean it like that. You ain't crazy that way. I

mean—hell, I been surprised how sane you guys all are. As near as I can tell you're not any crazier than the average asshole on the street...not, you know, crazy like the movies paint crazy people. You're just hung up...."

McMurphy's distinction between "crazy" and "hung-up" indicates the difference between someone who is truly "disturbed" and someone who has been trapped because they fail to conform to the norms of an oppressive society.

Toward the end of the novel, Harding tries to explain to McMurphy how his homosexuality, his difference, led to his confinement in the mental hospital:

"I discovered at an early age that I was—shall we be kind and say different? ...I indulged in certain practices that our society regards as shameful. And I got sick. It wasn't the practices, I don't think, it was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me—and the great voice of millions chanting , 'Shame. Shame. Shame.' It's society's way of dealing with someone different." (257)

Harding's homosexuality is only one way of being "different"; the other men in the ward have also been defined as crazy because they are different. McMurphy's response to Harding indicates that he, too, is an outcast:

"I'm different," McMurphy said. "Why didn't something like that happen to me? I've had people bugging me about one thing or another as far back as I can remember but that's not what—it didn't drive me crazy." (257)

Though McMurphy refuses at this point to admit that he is "crazy," the text makes it clear that he is, at least according to Harding's theory that there are certain "strong people" driven "along the road to crazy" (258) by the weak people who need their strength. Throughout the text, McMurphy exhibits an ambivalence about his own mental condition. Upon his arrival in the ward, McMurphy declares himself "bull goose loony" but then claims that "[a]s near as I can tell I'm no loony, or never knew it if I was" (69). At the end of the

novel, he will behave in a manner that may be regarded as crazy in the psychopathic sense. In the attack on the Nurse, we see McMurphy driven to a violent madness which goes beyond the sense of craziness as a position of social protest.

Another moment when the conventional notion of sanity is interrogated by the text occurs when the Chief finally speaks for the first time in fifteen years. He tells McMurphy about the Combine and how it destroyed his father and displaced their tribe. He asks McMurphy, "I been talking crazy, ain't I?" McMurphy's response breaks down the distinction between "crazy" and "sense"—between reason and unreason:

"Yeah, Chief...you been talkin' crazy."

"It wasn't what I wanted to say. I can't say it all. It don't make sense"

"I didn't say it didn't make sense, Chief, I just said it was talkin' crazy." (188)

The Chief's belief in the reality of the Combine is not just a "crazy" conspiracy theory—it is a lucid metaphor for the repressive effects of the dominant ideology. The idea that capitalist America is a model of social and economic justice may in fact be more fictional than the Chief's conspiracy theory. The Chief's crazy talk, like that of Colonel Matterson, has a logic of its own. As Native Americans, the Chief and his people represent, for Kesey, a position of integration with nature and an alternative society to that of the Combine.

While unreason offers an alternative to social norms that may be unjust or oppressive, it is the ideology of reason (Foucault's "Reason-Madness nexus") that works to sustain the social structure of Western culture. Of course, the forces that oppose reason offer the threat of anarchy, of a violent irrationality, but it is important to remember that "reason" itself is not an absolute and unchanging concept: reason manifests itself in various ways within specific historical contexts. In this sense, "reason" is not always a good thing: it can be a way of thinking and a form of behavior that is limiting, even oppressive.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault demonstrates how the relationship of madness to power functioned in the early modern period in Western Europe. Foucault describes a long tradition in Western Europe, beginning with the cultural shift which took place



when the medieval “rites of purification and seclusion” which had been acted out upon lepers were transferred to the insane (3). This led, in the seventeenth century, to “the Great Confinement,” when the poor, unemployed, and displaced were confined in “hospitals” that they shared with criminals and the insane. This was a policy on the part of the dominant powers to repress and confine any persons who were unwilling or unable to maintain “good order,” i.e., people who did not conform to the established structure of social norms. Those who refused to submit to the dictates of “reason” were criminalized and institutionalized. This institutionalization led to “the Birth of the Asylum,” a special space for the confinement of madness under the authority of medicine. From a very early point in the history of psychiatry, “a profound relation had been instituted...between madness and confinement, a link which was almost one of essence” (228). These events form the historical bases for the mental health industry which evolved later in the post-industrial West.

Kesey’s text shows us how the Reason-Unreason nexus operated in America during the 1950s and 1960s, a society which still felt the impetus of the “birth of the asylum” but placed the confinement of madness under a new technology whereby the scientific authority of psychiatric medicine was using more “humane” methods, including drugs and shock therapy, to rehabilitate its patients. The continued connection in American society between criminality and insanity is represented by the transfer of McMurphy from the “Pendleton Farm for Correction” to the mental hospital. His transfer is a movement across the rather hazy boundary between the place where criminals are incarcerated and “rehabilitated” to the place where the mentally ill are also “rehabilitated.” Reason and the Law stand together to discipline those who manifest “outbreaks of passion that suggest the possible diagnosis of psychopath” (46). Those, like McMurphy, who “fight too much and fuck too much” are disciplined for their anti-social behavior. As the narrative develops, however, it becomes clear that perhaps there *is* something wrong with McMurphy. His instinctive drives, his libidinal aggressions—these lead him to explode in violence when his role as protector of the male community within the asylum is challenged.

Once he is placed within the “therapeutic community” of the ward, McMurphy opposes his lust and laughter to the cold logic of the Big Nurse and her “ward policy.” McMurphy chafes under the rigid rules that govern the men’s lives. The routine of ward life, as

described by the Chief in the opening portion of the narrative, is a grotesque and exaggerated version of everyday life under modern American capitalism. It is a dehumanizing, tedious, and repetitive pattern which is scientifically measured and automatically scheduled for maximum precision—"efficiency locks the ward like a watchman's clock" (32). Part of its precision is the exactness of its microcosmic resemblance to the society produced by the Combine. According to the theory of Dr. Spivey, the Big Nurse's ward is "a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside" (48-49). Consistent with this theory is the Big Nurse's justification for her iron-clad rules: "A good many of you are in here because you could not adjust to the rules of society in the Outside world" (171).

The ward is an accurate replica of the "Outside world." What is wrong with the ward and the Big Nurse is also wrong with the world outside and its Big Brother-like powers: the hospital is part of the same conspiracy, the same mechanizing system. This system is one which claims to be "democratic," and so Dr. Spivey also maintains that his model of the larger society is a "democratic ward run completely by the patients and their votes...much like your own democratic, free neighborhoods" (40).<sup>4</sup> Dr. Spivey's liberal rhetoric, which claims all the authority of science, medicine, technology, and empirical truth, is obviously false, while the Chief's delusions about the Combine are, in fact, a more valid (though figurative) description of reality.

Before he comes out of the fog, the Chief cannot distinguish between dream or hallucination and reality. This is demonstrated by his description of the nightmare which he experiences because he goes to sleep without taking a tranquilizer. He claims that the dream is real but knows that no one would believe him: "...if I was fool enough to try and tell anybody about it they'd say, Idiot, you just had a nightmare; things as crazy as a big machine room down in the bowels of a dam where people get cut up by robot workers don't exist" (82). The next sentence speaks directly to the reader and asserts the existential reality of the Chief's nightmare against a world that has gaslighted him into silence and withdrawal: "But if they don't exist, how can a man see them?" (82). The Chief's imaginative insight is what makes *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* a tour de force of first-person narration. The Chief sees a whole analogical system that serves, metaphorically, to define the inhumanity of a society that demands total conformity.

The machine metaphor, primarily that of the Combine, dominates the text, particularly in the first half of the narrative and before the arrival of McMurphy. The first indication in the text that the narrator is not giving us a “sane” description of the world is his account of the encounter between the Nurse and her three psychiatric aides. They have “eyes glittering out of the black faces like the hard glitter of radio tubes out of the back of an old radio”(9). It soon becomes apparent to the reader that vivid images such as this are not mere metaphor—they are paranoid delusions and hallucinations that the narrator perceives as his reality. According to the Chief, Nurse Ratched first appears “in the shape of her hideous real self”(11) as a kind of robotic spider with a doll’s face and mechanical insides. She takes up her position in the nurses’ station:

I see her sit in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants.(30)

The Combine is described as a vast system of machines and robots, engaged in a process of converting human flesh, imagination, and individuality to a machine-world of freedomless conformity. The Chief locates the ward inside the very heart of the Machine. The Combine is machine-like, but it also has a sentient presence which is emphasized in the novel’s opening sentence: “They’re out there” (9). This Machine emits a sound—the sound of “low, relentless, brute power” (78). It watches, responds, maintains its system. The Combine reacts to any threat by “adjusting” uncooperative individuals. As the Chief warns McMurphy, “They *install* things. They start as quick as they see your gonna be big and go to working and installing their filthy machinery when you’re little, and keep on and on and on till your *fixed!*”(187). The replacement of flesh by machine is here a painful process ending in castration.

This is how the Combine works to recondition individual rebels. During the fishing trip organized by McMurphy, we see, through the Chief’s eyes, the mass production of “the Combine at work”:

All up the coast I could see the signs of what the combine has accomplished since I was last through this country

[presumably, since the end of World War II when the Chief was first institutionalized], things like, for example—a train stopping at a station and laying a string of full-grown men in mirrored suits and machined hats, laying them like a hatch of identical insects, half-life things coming pht-pht-pht out of the last car,...Or things like five thousand houses punched out identical by a machine and strung across the hills outside of town, so fresh from the factory they're still linked together like sausages.... (203)

The Chief's "crazy" way of seeing the landscape provides a powerfully critical image of mainstream American society in the 1950s. This mass production leads to a complete loss of individual identity:

...five thousand kids lived in those five thousand houses, owned by those guys that got off that train. The houses looked so much alike that, time and time again, the kids went home by mistake to different houses and different families. Nobody ever noticed.(203-04)

This is how the Combine re-produces itself, but the most powerful and most destructive products of the Combine are those machines that engage in the mass destruction of entire communities. Perhaps the ultimate product of the Combine is the war machine. Another important example is the tendency of the American military-industrial complex to sweep aside relatively powerless groups who stand in the way of its consuming needs: this is what happens when the government built a dam which displaced the Chief's tribe at The Dalles. The Chief describes these two machines—the war and the dam—as the things which have hurt him most: "I can see all that, and be hurt by it, the way I was hurt by seeing things in the army, in the war. The way I was hurt by seeing what happened to Papa and the tribe" (121). It is apparent to the reader that his tribe's displacement, his father's death, and his post-combat trauma have combined to bring about the Chief's madness.

The Chief's loss of sanity is directly related to his tribe's loss of identity. The Chief, his father, and his grandmother represent an aboriginal people who predate the establishment of the

urban-industrial Combine. They live in a completely different relationship to nature than the people in those “democratic neighborhoods” created by and for the Combine. Much of the novel’s imagery implies that it is a separation from nature and natural life that makes human beings crazy. The Combine, the dam, the robotic neighborhoods, the machines on the ward—all of these machines are contrasted to the natural vision and nature imagery that the Chief begins to express under the revivifying influence of McMurphy.

Before McMurphy is admitted to the ward, the Chief has been “adjusted.” He is a speechless automaton, a “giant janitor, a vanishing American, a six-foot-eight sweeping machine scared of its own shadow”(226). Gradually, under the influence of McMurphy, the Chief recovers the use of his senses, then the capacity for laughter, and finally his ability to speak. This recovery is a re-discovery of the self. It is not the kind of “recovery” which the Combine desires to accomplish—that would be a total *surrender* of the self, the “adjustment to surroundings” which occurs “when a completed product goes back out into society” (40).

An important moment in the Chief’s regeneration is when he regains his awareness of time as a natural cycle. Instead of internalized hallucinations or the artificial time of the ward, he describes a perception of external reality Outside, in the smell of the autumn air:

It’s fall coming, I kept thinking, fall coming; just like that was the strangest thing ever happened. Fall. Right outside here it was spring a while back, then it was summer, and now it’s fall—that’s sure a curious idea. (141)

The Chief then looks out the dormitory window and sees a young mongrel dog running in the moonlight. The dog runs off in pursuit of a flock of migrating geese. He watches the geese as “...they crossed the moon—a black, weaving necklace, drawn into a V by that lead goose. For an instant that lead goose was right in the center of that circle, bigger than the others, a black cross opening and closing, then he pulled his V out of sight into the sky once more”(143). In this sequence, Kesey is clearly showing how the Chief’s revival is a response to the “call of the wild”—it is a recovery of the natural world. This rebirth of awareness is a return to natural vision, and it is a direct product of McMurphy’s presence. The lead goose is obviously

McMurphy, the goose of the children's rhyme, leading the flock of loonies out of the ward—"one flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo's nest...goose swoops down and plucks *you* out" (239). The sequence foreshadows later events, when the moon will shine again on the Chief's escape. Then, when the Chief throws the control panel through the tub room window, "the glass splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth." (271-72).

McMurphy, like the Chief, is a kind of natural man, someone still free of the Combine's control. He brings with his laughter "the man smell of dust and dirt from the open fields, and sweat, and work"(91). "The Combine hasn't got to him in all these years" (140) says the Chief, and he speculates on how McMurphy has managed this: "Maybe he grew up so wild all over the country, batting around from one place to another, never around one town longer'n a few months when he was a kid so a school never got much a hold on him...keeping on the move so much that the Combine never had a chance to get anything installed"(84). But there is a cost for this freedom from the system. The system is "big" and the text implies that it is only a matter of time until individual rebels are brought to heel. Describing McMurphy's seemingly heroic struggle against the Combine, the Chief says, "the thing he was fighting, you couldn't whip it for good. All you could do was keep on whipping it, till you couldn't come out any more and somebody else had to take your place" (265).

The men in the ward have been "whipped" by the Big Nurse. She has taken away their ability to laugh and replaced it with fear. When McMurphy arrives and sees this, he tells them, "A man go around lettin' a woman whip him down till he can't laugh any more, and he loses one of the biggest edges he's got on his side" (65-66). McMurphy restores their masculinity through various forms of male bonding, including laughter. This bonding is also signified by the ritualized hand-shaking that takes place when he arrives in the ward. Throughout the text, the disembodied male hand is a recurring motif (along with the disembodied face). The hand of McMurphy serves as a metonym for McMurphy's full identity. It transmits a power, a life force, to the Chief:

I remember the fingers were thick and strong closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like

he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. (27)

Later, the Chief describes the men voting against the Big Nurse by raising their hands: "...that big red hand of McMurphy's is reaching into the fog and dropping down and dragging the men up by their hands, dragging them blinking into the open" (124). It is the text's celebration of male strength, exemplified in these images of the male hand, that I wish to turn to now. I have discussed the way that Kesey's novel comprises a social critique of power in American society, but along with the social criticism is a nostalgia for the male myth of the American frontier hero. What I will go on to describe is the way that both the myth *and* the social critique are expressed within a certain gender construct—a gender construct that diminishes significantly the power of the novel's social critique.

Kesey's construction of nature and naturalness is clearly gendered in terms of a male strength and sexuality which he places in opposition to female power. According to Harding, the men on the ward are "victims of a matriarchy" (59). In the struggle between McMurphy and the Big Nurse, Good and Evil are represented in the form of Male and Female. And this struggle is clearly marked as a sexual one: Nurse Ratched derives a great deal of her power from her ability to infantilize and humiliate the men—to render them sexless. McMurphy calls her a "ball-cutter," and according to Harding's analogy she is the "wolf" who has turned the men into castrated "rabbits." Harding describes himself and the other patients: "...most of us lack the sexual ability to make the grade as adequate rabbits. Failures, we are—feeble, stunted, weak little creatures in a weak little race. Rabbits, *sans* whambam; a pathetic notion" (63). The patients' sexless condition is matched by the Big Nurse's denial of her own sexuality and humanity.

The Big Nurse is described as a woman who denies her essential femaleness in order to exercise power over men. This is emphasized repeatedly in physical description such as this:

Her face is precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils—everything working together except the color on her lips and fingernails, and the size of her bosom. A

mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would have otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it” (11).

Just as McMurphy is represented by his hands, the Big Nurse is metonymized in her breasts. Her lips are also a focal point: they are “like a doll’s lips ready for a fake nipple” (27). She becomes a parody of a nurturing, protective mother. The Chief calls her “that smiling flour-faced old mother there with the too-red lipstick and the too-big boobs” (48).

In the sexual battle between the men on the ward and the Big Nurse, McMurphy becomes a kind of sexual savior, come to restore their collective virility. He sacrifices himself so that the other men on the ward may be redeemed. Some critics have seen him as a fisher-king figure, and he is clearly compared to Christ in Kesey’s text.<sup>5</sup> In the Chief’s words, he “doled out his life for us to live” (218). On the fishing trip, McMurphy sets out with his twelve disciples in their ship of fools, and as they depart the ward, Ellis tells Billy Bibbit “to be a fisher of men” (198). Through laughter, he achieves their salvation. This is stressed in the epiphany that occurs on the fishing boat, when the Chief feels himself transported by “a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave” (212). The Chief is born again: “I was feeling better than I’d remembered feeling since I was a kid, when everything was good and the land was still singing kid’s poetry to me” (216). Later, McMurphy’s electro-shock therapy is described as a crucifixion. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is, in this sense, the gospel of McMurphy according to Chief Bromden.

The Christian allusions in the novel form part of the mythic structure in the text, but the myth is not a strictly Christian one—it is also the pagan fertility myth of McMurphy as sacrificial scapegoat. McMurphy’s sexual energy and life-restoring power is contrasted to the Nurse’s ability to sap all libidinal force. Nurse Ratched tries to repress and deny these aggressive, vital energies. She tries to ignore McMurphy: “She walked right on past, ignoring him just like she chose to ignore the way nature had tagged her with those outsized badges of femininity, just like she was above him, and sex and everything else that’s weak and of the flesh” (138). Thus, the text



associates naturalness, maleness, and sexuality: overly aggressive women are presented as a threat to all this and as the cause of madness. The sexual aggression appears to conceal anxiety. Male fears of castration and anal penetration appear repeatedly in the text: in the menacing “black boys” who rape patients, in the references to “ball-cutting,” and in the Chief’s anxiety about his feelings for McMurphy. Repressed homosexuality is a part of the male bonding pattern, and it can be seen in one of the most awkward moments in Kesey’s novel.

Thanks to McMurphy, the Chief speaks for the first time in fifteen years. After this happens, he is overwhelmed with a feeling of love for his friend and savior:

I wished I’d told him good night. I looked over at him, and he was turned away from me....I wanted to reach over and touch the place where he was tattooed, to see if he was still alive....That’s a lie. I know he’s still alive. That ain’t the reason I want to touch him. I want to touch him because he’s a man. That’s a lie too. There’s other men around. I could touch them. I want to touch him because I’m one of those queers! But that’s a lie too. That’s one fear hiding behind another. If I was one of these queers I’d want to do other things with him. I just want to touch him because he’s who he is. (188)

According to Leslie Fiedler, male bonding in American literature (especially between a white protagonist and an ethnic minority companion) reveals a cultural denial of mature loving male relationships.<sup>6</sup> Part of the repression and sublimation of male love is the traditional flight from women and the domestic which is a typical feature of the dominant American myth of the male hero. Furthermore, the male bonding in this context can be founded on a shared aggression toward women: “strong men” assert their “heroic” male sexuality against women like the Big Nurse, Harding’s wife, or Billy Bibbit’s mother—aggressive, controlling women who are represented from the masculinist perspective as castrators.

A look at some of Kesey’s comments, from letters and interviews, may help to elucidate his celebration of male aggressiveness in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. In a letter to his friend, Ken Babbs, written while Kesey was working on the novel,

Kesey tells Babbs that he had recently heard a tape about the brainwashing of P.O.W.s in Korea: "It was most enlightening, especially in terms of the book that I'm writing. It had a lot to do with the 'Code of Conduct.' Remember it? we used to ridicule it upstairs in the ROTC office at Stanford? Well, I'm becoming very square or something—but I'm beginning to believe the code has a lot to it, a lot about strength. Strength is the key. We need strong men."<sup>7</sup> In an interview in 1963, Kesey spoke again of his belief in male power: "Look, I don't intend to let anybody make me live in less of a world than I am capable of living in. Babbs once said it perfectly: A man should have the right to be as big as he feels it's in him to be. People are reluctant to permit this."<sup>8</sup> Kesey's call for such "big, strong men" is loud and clear in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

McMurphy tries to restore the men's masculinity through various forms of male bonding—the handshake is one. Gambling, drinking, and whoring also serve to unite men, and McMurphy succeeds in initiating some of the ward into these activities as well. These activities are shared by the men on the fishing excursion, as well as in the novel's conclusion, when the all-male ward rises in rebellion against the Big Nurse. At night, while the Nurse is gone, they take over the ward and violate its order and sanctity by throwing a drunken party. With the connivance of Mr. Turkle, the attendant on the night shift, McMurphy brings in two prostitutes. This leads to the sexual initiation of the young Billy Bibbit. Pressuring Billy to lose his virginity, McMurphy refuses to hear Billy's stuttering objection, saying, "Don't you mamamamurphy me, Billy Boy" (249). When the Big Nurse arrives in the morning to find Billy and his "date" still sleeping together in the Seclusion Room, she uses this opportunity to reassert her maternal control. She threatens to tell Billy's mother and then leads him "into the office, stroking his bowed head and saying, 'Poor boy, poor little boy'" (265). Billy's suicide leads to the final confrontation between McMurphy and the Big Nurse.

In order to understand the full significance of McMurphy's attack on the Nurse, we must look earlier in the novel to see where this event is foreshadowed. It is during the dialogue between Harding and McMurphy, after McMurphy's first group meeting, that Harding suggests that laughter is an ineffective means to "show a woman who's boss" (66):

“...man has but *one* truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy, but it certainly is not laughter. One weapon, and with every passing year in this hip, motivationally researched society, more and more people are discovering how to render that weapon useless and conquer those who have hitherto been the conquerors...and do you think, for all your proclaimed psychopathic powers, that you could effectively use your weapon against our champion? Do you ever think you could use it against Miss Ratched, McMurphy? Ever?”

This challenge deprives McMurphy of his usual confidence and bluster, and Harding presses home his point:

“She’s not all that homely McMurphy....in spite of all her attempts to *conceal* them, in that sexless get-up, you can still make out the evidence of some rather extraordinary breasts. She must have been a rather beautiful young woman. Still—for the sake of argument, could you get it up over her even if she wasn’t old, even if she was young and had the beauty of Helen?”

“...you’re by God right. I couldn’t get it up over old frozen face there even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe.”

“There you are. She’s won.”

For a moment, the stud champion seems temporarily defeated by the emasculating powers of that “impregnable woman,” the Big Nurse, but McMurphy soon rallies his sense of male honor, declaring “I’ve never seen a woman I thought was more man than me” and vowing to “put a betsy bug up that nurse’s butt within a week”(68-69). Later, though, he comes up against the same problem: the men declare that the Big Nurse is “the root of all the trouble” in the ward, but McMurphy argues that “getting shut of her wouldn’t be getting shut of the real deep-down hang-up that’s causing the gripes”(165). He claims that if the only real problem were “just this old nurse with her sex worries, then the solution to all your problems would be to just throw her down and solve all her worries, wouldn’t it?” When Scanlon tells him that he is “just the stud to handle the job,” McMurphy seems to admit that this may well be the solution to their problems, but he is

not willing to do “the job” himself because he is committed and needs the Nurse to recommend his release from the hospital.

At the end of the novel, McMurphy finally does “the job.” It has not been noted before that McMurphy’s attack on the Big Nurse, following Billy’s suicide, is not merely an attempt to kill Nurse Ratched—it is in fact *a rape*.<sup>9</sup> The dialogue I have cited above shows how Kesey has set this up (either consciously or unconsciously) to be a rape, and the language that the Chief uses to describe the scene indicates clearly that this is a sexual attack. According to the logic expressed in the conversations between McMurphy and the others, it is only the sexual violation of the Big Nurse that can guarantee a conclusive victory for the men of the ward. Only this can get to the root of the trouble and restore their lost masculinity. It is distinctly apparent that this act is committed as a collective act. McMurphy represents the group. He is sent forward as a sacrificial hero—“just the stud to handle the job”—but he will pay the price of the scapegoat for his action. The Chief says, “We couldn’t stop him because we were the ones making him do it” (267) and goes on to recount the event in one long sentence:

Only at the last—after he’d smashed through that glass door, her face swinging around, with terror forever ruining any look she might ever try to use again, screaming when he grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anyone had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light—only at the last, after the officials realized that the three black boys weren’t going to do anything but stand and watch and they would have to beat him off without their help doctors and nurses and supervisors prying those heavy red fingers out of the white flesh of her throat as if they were her neck bones, jerking him backward off of her with a loud heave of breath, only then did he show any sign that he might be anything other than a sane, willful, dogged man performing a hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not. (267)

Here, at the end of the novel, the text asks the reader to be

implicated as a willing witness and accessory to the Nurse's rape. How should we react to the assertion that this rape is the act of "a sane, willful, dogged man performing a hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not"? To the implication that this violation of a woman's body is a "natural" fulfillment of McMurphy's role as hero? That "strong" men should assert their strength against strong women in this way? If we do not react with horror, if we do not finally at this moment feel sympathy for Nurse Ratched, then we will be insufficiently critical in our reading. Only if our perspective is a purely masculinist one, a perspective that is committed to the idea of the male myth, will we celebrate the rape of the Big Nurse as McMurphy's heroic sacrifice. The text, however, is carefully calculated to encourage this. It uses the discourses of sacred fury, of natural impulse, of archetypal romance myth, to convince the reader that the rape "just had to be done, like it or not." The atavistic male myths of bonding, initiation, freedom and sacrifice are ultimately accompanied by a representation of and an attitude toward women that is atavistic and brutal (and perhaps adolescent as well). After all, what is the nature of this subversive night of freedom and revelry when the men assert their vital impulses so heroically against the Nurse and the Combine? The Chief describes his participation in the event:

Drunk and running and laughing and carrying on with women square in the center of the Combine's most powerful stronghold. ...Maybe the Combine wasn't all-powerful. What was to stop us from doing it again, now that we saw we could? Or keep us from doing other things we wanted? (255)

This is obviously a crude, adolescent rebellion. It is, in fact, a one-night stand that offers little hope for long-term freedom. If this is the only program the text offers for resistance to the Combine, then it can only represent a bare beginning.

The nature of McMurphy's opposition to authority is also questionably crude. McMurphy's response to the system, his "natural" rebellion to an unnatural, mechanical system, is a kind of violent, instinctive reaction to that authority—not a real, viable form of protest or a strategy to create change. The conflict between the Big Nurse and McMurphy is finally reduced to a bestial combat, at the lowest level of human response. The instinctive drives that moved the men away

from the Combine and toward nature are ultimately tied to a primitive violence that is “natural” in a very negative way. This is apparent in McMurphy’s last utterance: “A sound of cornered animal fear and hate and surrender and defiance ...the last sound the treed and shot and falling animal makes as the dogs get him, when he finally doesn’t care any more about anything but himself and his dying” (267). If this is the return to nature that the text promises, then we should think twice about the wisdom of such a regression.

In Kesey’s novel, McMurphy and the men on the ward take the fight against “the merciless language of non-madness” (Foucault, ix) to the level of the body: to the belly-laugh, to the brawl with the orderlies, and to the non-linguistic expression of sexuality. Following McMurphy’s example, their approach to gender relations is limited to physical eroticism, with plenty of macho posturing. Harding and the Chief may have developed a sophisticated sense of their alienation from society, but their notions about the role of women in the social formation are crude and undeveloped. The male myth that unites the men gathers them together against a common enemy, but surprisingly this enemy is not the Combine—it is women. Here, the men misidentify the source of their oppression. Their strategy begins with a merely verbal expression of hostility or sexual dominance but ultimately results in a regression to a violent physicality. This regression culminates in the rape of Nurse Ratched, an event which occurs because all of the men want it to happen. Not one of them, not even one of the orderlies, tries to stop McMurphy. When McMurphy attacks her, his action is not “anti-social” or “crazy” in the progressively subversive Foucauldian sense: instead, it is an act of insane misogyny, a violent impulse which plunges McMurphy to the level of non-rational animality and destroys him. In the end, McMurphy’s psychopathic madness is the crudest and most violent form of misogyny—a rape—and this is the novel’s representation of genuine madness, with none of the redeeming features that are found in the politically radical irrationality of Foucault’s *Civilization and Madness* or Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*.

After the rape of the Nurse, we can no longer say that McMurphy’s code represents a worthy program for action against the dominant social order. The novel’s sexual savior suffers “castration of the frontal lobes” and the Combine rolls on. McMurphy seems to have fallen into their trap—he truly becomes crazy in the end. If this is true, then what kind of redemption can be salvaged from the tragedy of

McMurphy? One way to redeem McMurphy is to present him as a mythic figure in a “symbolic” struggle between good and evil, to raise the story to the archetypal level. But to do this would be to avoid the level of political and social significance. Some critics have tried to recuperate the Chief as a kind of *raisonneur* whose perspective represents a third, more moderate position apart from the crude binary opposition between the Nurse’s insane order and McMurphy’s violent resistance.<sup>10</sup> If McMurphy comes to embody the male capacity for misogyny and violence against women, the Chief offers a position that is perhaps less reprehensible.

I want to conclude this analysis by turning to the Chief and his relationship with McMurphy. The Chief learns not only about the need to resist the oppressive institutions of the Combine like the mental hospital, but he also comes to understand the way that male power, focused in McMurphy, functions in a destructive way: “He is able to understand the terrible power of groups and, more than that, the power of the individual to reject social control.”<sup>11</sup> The Chief sees how McMurphy was a sacrificial victim of the male group, offered up to the Combine in exchange for their collective freedom.

Leslie Fiedler has shown how the smothering of the labotomized McMurphy is described in erotic terms.<sup>12</sup> The scene evokes Othello’s killing of Desdemona, another eroticized murder which takes on a ritualized quality. The Chief, like Othello, is called upon by a deep sense of justice and honor to smother the person he loves using a pillow. The Chief’s execution of McMurphy allows for the final transference, begun with the original handshake, of McMurphy’s life force to himself:

The big, hard body had a tough grip on life. It fought a long time against having it taken away, flailing and thrashing around so much I finally had to lie full length on top of it and scissor the kicking legs with mine while I mashed the pillow into the face. I lay there on top of the body for what seemed days. Until the thrashing stopped. Until it was still a while and had shuddered once and was still again. Then I rolled off. (270)

This may be read as another rape, a deadly violation of McMurphy’s body—another “hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not.”

It is only after committing this act that the Chief can leave the ward. He throws the control panel through the screen of the tub room window and leaps out “into the moonlight” (272). Then he runs “across the grounds in the direction I remembered seeing the dog go, toward the highway” (272). At this point, the narrative finally catches up to the present moment in which the Chief speaks to the reader. The use of first-person present tense throughout the text has made it seem like the Chief is still trapped inside the ward, though presumably he is telling the tale from Outside. Of course, the use of present tense is at one level merely a narrative device designed to create suspense, but it also works to emphasize the fact that the Combine has not been defeated.

The Chief has been released, but his newly recovered sanity has yet to be tested against the world Outside. He wants to go home—to return to The Dalles—“to look over the country around the gorge again, just to bring some of it clear in my mind again” (272). The narrative frame of the text indicates at both beginning and end that the Chief’s vision is still not “clear.” His sense of the past must be reintegrated with his sense of the future. The novel’s concluding sentence, “I been away a long time” (with its echo of Huck Finn’s last line, “I been there before”), alludes to the impossibility of escaping from society by running away. As the Chief describes his escape from the hospital, he says, “I felt like I was flying. Free” (272). But how will he feel when he returns to his tribal land and sees “that big million-dollar hydro-electric dam”?

The Chief’s first-person narration may constitute a therapeutic talking cure, but it is still a largely *internalized* monologue and the telling of it “burns” him. The Chief must now test his ability to communicate in a society that speaks the language of Foucault’s “reason.” He has proved himself strong enough to break out to the Outside, but now he is as alone as McMurphy in the world that, in Harding’s words, “belongs to the strong” (60). We are left with a powerful intimation that the Chief’s return to nature may ultimately lead him into confrontation with the Combine. Perhaps he will be its next victim. Furthermore, the Chief’s position Outside seems to be circumscribed by the horizon of masculinist supremacy: his nostalgia for The Dalles is not only a wish to revive the old sense of integration with nature that he had known as a child—it is also a search for another form of male bonding—that of “the tribe”—a group of men who can replace the male community of the ward. If this is all the



Chief has to hope for, then he cannot be considered a more admirable replacement for the misogynist hero, McMurphy. Thus, the novel leaves the reader with a rather grim choice—to embrace the male myth of sacrifice and violence as an alternative to the Combine, or to find the text empty of any positive alternative. This second reading is, I am afraid, the only conscionable choice.

## NOTES

- 1 Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking Press, 1962) 40. All further quotations from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* will be taken from this edition.
- 2 See Robert Forrey's "rejoinder" to what he sees as "...an unfortunate trend among male critics to overpraise a novel which may be conservative, if not reactionary, politically; sexist, if not psychopathological, psychologically; and very low, if not downright lowbrow, in terms of the level of sensibility it reflects, a sensibility which has been influenced most strongly not by the Bible or a particularly literary tradition as much as by comic books..."(222-23). Forrey places *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in what he calls "the misogynist tradition" of Hemingway and Steinbeck.
- 3 Apparently, some of the characters in the novel are based on the patients at the mental hospital in Menlo Park. According to an interview with Kesey, though, "McMurphy was fictional, inspired by the tragic longings of the real men I worked with on the ward, the sketches of whom, both visual and verbal, came more easily to my hand than anything before or since, and these sketches gradually enclosed for me the outline of the hero they wanted" (cited in MacGrath 371).
- 4 Michael J. Gargas McGrath, in an essay about the novel's critique of liberal democracy, points to the role of the Chief, who "leaves no doubt...that although the ward is indeed a microcosm of other institutions in American Society, it hardly has anything to do with liberal individualism ....Individual rights and freedoms are always subordinated to the bureaucratic need for social order and control as determined by Nurse Ratched" (366).
- 5 See Raymond M. Olderman. *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972) 35-51 and Ronald Wallace. *The Last Laugh: Form and Affirmation in the Contemporary American Comic Novel* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1979) 90-115.

- 6 See “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey” in *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966); and *The Return of the Vanishing American*. (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).
- 7 Cited in Tanner 29.
- 8 Cited in Madden 205.
- 9 In the film version of the novel, the director Milos Forman chose to film the scene as a violent physical attack but not as a successful rape. In doing so, he was certainly deviating from the text.
- 10 See Madden, “Sanity and Responsibility: Big Chief as Narrator and Executioner,” for an attempt to displace the critical debate surrounding the character of McMurphy by locating the Chief as a more admirable hero at the center of the novel.
- 11 Madden 215.
- 12 See Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American*, 182: “He creeps into the bed of his friend...for what turns out to be an embrace—for only in a caricature of the act of love can he manage to kill him.”

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