

Terror, Love, and the National Voyeur: Gilbert Parker's *The Seats of the Mighty*

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One of the most popular Canadian novels of the late nineteenth century is one that many non-specialists today may not have even heard of, Gilbert Parker's *The Seats of the Mighty* (1896). The novel, which is set like many Canadian novels of the time during the "fall" of Quebec, received "instant international acclaim" (Ripley 9) and was the first of Parker's novels to be published in a Canadian edition, which eventually became a standard high-school text (Adams 85). A theatrical version of the novel was staged in 1897, attended by U.S. President Grover Cleveland at the Boston performance and put on in London, England, for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (Ripley 9). There are some good reasons why this particular novel was so well known among English speakers at the turn of the century and so significant for anglophone Canadians especially, although these reasons have yet to be fully explored. The few critics who have recently looked at the novel notice its racism in the way it pits British-Canadian morality against French decadence.¹ However, what I am particularly interested in here is

1 For example, Darlene Kelly sees in much of Parker's fiction "a genuine fear and dislike of French Canadians" (36) and John Robert Sorfleet argues that in *The Seats of the Mighty* "Parker translate[s] the political conflict between France

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that this decadence is not merely condemned and dismissed but reformulated in such a way that it can be controlled by anglophone Canadians. Francophones in the novel are *both* celebrated and disavowed through a complex process that involves an anxious surveillance to distinguish and categorize cultures that, on the surface of the skin, appear similar.

Parker's manipulation of the genre of the historical romance is key in relation to this project. In *A Purer Taste*, Carole Gerson describes the popularity of this genre in nineteenth-century Canada, indicating how early English Canadians were looking for the same "nationalistic affect" in their own fiction that Sir Walter Scott had achieved in his for Great Britain (68). As Gerson points out, English Canadians often drew upon the "colourful history" of French Canada in historical romances in order to establish "cultural distinctiveness from Great Britain on the one hand and the United States on the other" (111). Especially around the turn of the century, many English Canadians wanted this "cultural distinctiveness," while still wishing for strong ties to Britain. Parker, born in Canada, was an imperialist who spent part of his life residing in Britain and eventually became a Member of Parliament there. Thus, his portrayals of Canada often seem to characterize it as interesting and distinct, but in ways that wouldn't alienate British readers. The task of glamorizing French Canada, without de-valourizing Britain, is one of the key processes in early Canadian historical romances generally and Parker's work specifically. In *The Seats of the Mighty*, the voyeurism of the protagonist juxtaposes two common elements of the historical romance, gothicism and the love story, in order to work out this process.²

The novel centres on the relationship between Robert Moray, a British soldier in captivity in Quebec, and Alixe Duvarney, a young *Canadienne*. Throughout the novel, the lovers' happiness is threatened by the war, the Catholic Church, and Tinoir Doltaire, a charming French villain who wants Alixe for himself. As several critics have noticed, *The Seats of the Mighty* plays out through its love story the conflicts between the nations (what Carl Murphy calls "the marriage metaphor" of early Canadian fic-

and England into a moral war of French love-of-self versus English love-of-country" (133).

² Early gothics were often referred to as romances (Heiland 4), and I acknowledge that the two genres are often conflated, just as contemporary love stories are popularly referred to as "romances." My discussion views the gothic and the love-story plot as significant aspects of this particular historical romance, although my point is not to rigidly define the novel's genre but to focus on specific elements in the text in order to examine the way the novel works.

tion), with Alixe standing in for French Canada, Robert for the British, and Doltaire for the French;³ that is, Alixe's "choice" of Robert represents Quebec's allegiance to Britain over France. However, critics have failed to adequately examine the appeal, for both Robert and readers, and in such a pro-anglophone novel, of the villainous Doltaire, nor have they really explained why the heroine, far from being a damsel in distress, is a far more active character than Robert himself, or why Parker appears so obsessed with voyeuristic moments. Such elements, as I will demonstrate, are related to another understudied aspect of the novel—the ways it contributes to and draws upon colonial discourses and processes present in other parts of the British Empire in Parker's day.⁴

One of these processes is the surveillance of the colonial Other. In two crucial scenes in the novel, Robert spies on the French-Canadian characters: once in a convent, and once in a church. These voyeuristic or scopophilic moments condense what is going on in the novel in terms of its portrayals of French and British cultures, and generic motifs are an important means of creating these portrayals. The gothic elements in the novel—those things which are mysterious or which point to a crossing of various kinds of boundaries—are often associated with the French. These elements, though, rather than simply discrediting francophones, create moments of ambivalence for the novel's protagonist. What I mean is that his attitudes toward the French are contradictory but also that cultural identities in the novel become uncertain. Robert resorts to spying as a means of gaining power through demystifying the French, an action which often only indicates further his own unstable position. It is my postulation that such gothic moments of instability are in tension with the love story plot and that this tension is crucial to the novel's representation of nation. Parker's novel enacts the construction of the French as gothic and then the attempted dismantling of this mysteriousness and transgressiveness via surveillance and the love story.

While I use a variety of critics to explore the relationships between genre and voyeurism/surveillance in the novel, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is a useful jumping-off point for a con-

3 See Coleman 192, Kelly 47, Duffy 16–17, and Sorfleet 133.

4 The existing criticism considers the novel's relationship to Canada's colonial status, but because most of this criticism was published before 1980, it does not use some of the more recent developments in postcolonial theory to place the novel within a broader context of colonial processes in the British empire generally. An exception is Daniel Coleman's brief discussion of the novel in *White Civility*.

sideration of the aggression of Robert's gaze and his role as a stand-in for readers, gazing as and at Doltaire and Alixe. I complicate Mulvey's ideas, however (as others have done), by indicating the instability and even danger of identification and by considering identification and aggression along lines of culture as well as gender. Aspects of film theory are particularly relevant, despite the fact that I am analyzing a piece of literature, given Parker's obsession with scenes of voyeurism in this and other works. (Such a motif may help explain why *The Seats of the Mighty*, and several other novels of Parker's, were made into films, their particular content suiting the voyeuristic process of early cinema). As well, the work of postcolonial theorists, such as Homi Bhabha and Anne McClintock, provide insight into the gaze in colonial relations and help explain Parker's fascination with looking and spying in this novel, as well as the relationship between gender and colonialism in my discussion of Alixe. *The Seats of the Mighty* used to be one of Canada's most popular novels, and reconsideration of it in light of psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory, and a closer examination of its genre, can shed light on the complexities of English-Canadian attempts to adapt colonial discourse to construct francophones, themselves white colonizers, as in need of the civilizing processes of colonization, as well as exploring further the relationship between the historical romance, imperialism, and nationalism.

We are dealing here with a specific kind of colonial situation, in that the two powers in the novel are both white and European or of European descent. Around the time that *The Seats of the Mighty* was published, there was a general feeling of unrest about the waning power of the British Empire. Patrick Brantlinger, in his discussion of the "Imperial Gothic," notices that "After the mid-Victorian years the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial 'stock'" (230). In Canada, this situation may have been especially anxious due to immigration but also due to the fact that a large portion of the population practised a different religion than that of the dominant culture. There was a great deal of concern about keeping up, not just the white population, but the white English Protestant population. As Mariana Valverde points out in her study of the purity movement in turn-of-the-century Canada, "Anglo-Saxons could see themselves as a specific race only in contrast to others. These others were not all identical: there was an elaborate classification system that ranked national and ethnic groups according to a combination of geographical, physiological, and moral criteria" (110). While French Canadians passed one set of criteria

because “lighter-skinned people were to be preferred to dark-skinned people,” most of them failed in that “Protestants were far preferable to Catholics” (Valverde 110).

It was clear that the French were “different,” but just how different was not always immediately perceivable. Bhabha argues that “skin, as a signifier of discrimination, must be produced or processed as visible” in the colonial order, in order to differentiate the colonizer and colonized and establish power (113). Racial heritage is not a straightforward observable fact, which is why Bhabha refers to the *production* of skin differences as visible, but such a process of differentiation becomes even more troublesome between white English and French Canadians. This, I think, made the issue of surveillance particularly anxious for English Canadians, who needed very much to see and establish distinctions between themselves and French Canadians, even as they appropriated certain aspects of French-Canadian culture to establish an English-Canadian sense of nationhood.

Some statements by George Monro Grant indicate one of the prevailing attitudes toward French Canadians in Parker’s time: “As a people, they are to a great extent an unknown quality. We need some one to reveal them” (quoted in Kelly 38). He adds that they are “a Christian civilization that is not of our type, but that is altogether beautiful from some points of view” (quoted in Kelly 38). Darlene Kelly quotes these comments in her article on Parker, arguing that he was influenced by Grant and that Parker’s portrayals of French Canada were part of a project promoting Canada’s participation in the imperialist project. However, Kelly does not take up the issue of investigation and surveillance—present in words such as “unknown,” “reveal,” “view”—that these comments stress and that are a key aspect of early English-Canadian representations of French Canadians generally, as well as representations in *The Seats of the Mighty* specifically. French Canadians, from Grant’s perspective, are mysterious and need to be observed, delineated, and recorded. Part of what Parker does in his novel is to attempt to do just this.

There is one scene in the novel that is particularly revealing. Alixe’s marriage to Robert, a Protestant, is condemned by the Catholic Church, which confines Alixe to a convent. Disguised as a French soldier, Robert gains entry to the convent where he watches, through a hole in the wall, a confrontation between Alixe and Doltaire, who tries to seduce her. If one reads the scene through the marriage metaphor, then Alixe (French Canada) is a territory over which Doltaire (France) would like to “lift [his] standard” (333) and Robert (Britain) would like to protect her from him. Rather than fighting for Alixe/French Canada in the convent, though,

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Robert only watches as Doltaire attempts to seduce Alixe. Robert's position here is that of the voyeur. He gets a "thrill" watching the scene unfold and—almost making a fetish of one of Alixe's body parts—notices her "perfect rounded arm" peeking out of the lace of her sleeve (332). Robert, in fact, is characterized by his power of sight. In the scene where he is positioned behind the tapestry, he uses the verb "to see" in relation to his own actions six times in the first two pages.

This seeming passivity is, of course, actually what gives Robert his power. Freud affiliates the scopophilic instinct with the desire to know, which is in turn related to the desire for mastery (194), an idea upon which several critics, in a variety of contexts, have drawn. Mulvey's proposition in "Visual Pleasure" is that the active male hero in film acts as a representative of the self for spectators. Through him, they enact fantasies of control and power, including aggressively gazing at the female leads in such narratives. Robert's role in the novel, though, as a passive hero, actually places the spectator *within* the narrative; events are told through Robert's first-person narration, so readers are asked to identify with the watching male, whose other actions are limited due to his status as prisoner.⁵ I will come back to this issue in more detail later, but I believe that one of the reasons for Robert's voyeurism is that he is a representative of British power in Canada, and, according to Bhabha, such colonial power is often enacted through surveillance, which he views as a corollary of scopophilic/voyeuristic pleasure (109). Bhabha clearly ties such pleasure to the colonizer's desire for power: "Colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (101), and the "predominant strategic function" of colonial discourse "is the creation of a space for 'subject peoples' through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised" (100–01). Bhabha's statements might apply to *The Seats of the Mighty*, despite the distinct racial situation I outlined above, because Parker's novel is set during a pivotal time for British imperial power in Canada, and Parker himself was an adamant

5 Robert's construction in the novel loosely follows Mulvey's description of the spectator in that he identifies with an active male and desires a female, although this is problematized somewhat, as I will show. I recognize that processes of identification and desire for Parker's readers may have been more complex. Robert's first-person narration and his place as the novel's protagonist, as well as the fact that he is the only major anglophone character in a book aimed at nineteenth-century anglophone readers, suggest that Parker intended for his readers to identify most strongly with Robert, and my argument is that this is key for the novel's presentation of nation. This does not rule out the possibility, though, that readers may have also identified with other characters, for alternate reasons.

supporter of imperialism. Robert becomes the colonial voyeur, who uses the gaze in attempts to control the other, making him an appealing protagonist for many of Parker's readers.

As I've already suggested, the act of surveying the other is perhaps even more anxious and important in Canada at this time because of the *lack* of difference in skin colour between the English and the French. As a British male, Robert must look extra carefully to locate characteristics that will distinguish his people from the French and stereotype the French so that they will become knowable (controllable). This is all the more important because in the time period of the novel's setting the French and English in Canada are at war and on more or less equal terms. Part of this historical novel's process is to manufacture the French, through "re-telling" the story of the war, as a subordinate people in Canada. In the context of Parker's own time, the novel insists upon anglophone Protestant dominance over a rather large, and thus threatening, minority in Canada. At one point, while Robert watches the Catholic Church dissolve his marriage to Alixe, he is hidden and positioned, significantly, above everyone else, so that he has all of French-Canadian society within his gaze and is able to classify them like so many scientific objects: "I looked down upon a mass of people, soldiers, couriers of the woods, beggars, priests, camp followers, and anxious gentlefolk" (318–19). Here, despite the fact that the British have not yet won the war, Robert's actions seem to be those of an imperial authority, "marking out a 'subject nation'" through surveillance (Bhabha 101) and performing the categorization for which Grant calls.

The fact that two such key voyeuristic scenes take place in Catholic structures points to the novel's gothic elements. British gothic literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often employed the Catholic settings of Europe, and Gerson notices that Quebec's Catholicism performed a similar role in fiction for English-Canadian writers (112). According to Susan Griffin, part of the horror of Catholicism for nineteenth-century British and American writers was that it formed the roots of Protestantism itself and thus was often figured as the uncanny, with Catholic peoples appearing "as familiar yet foreign presences" (7). She adds, "Protestantism's legitimacy depends upon tracing its origins to, and differentiating itself from, Roman Catholicism" (8). In this way, Parker's search for Canadian nationalism takes as its model that of British and, to some extent, American nationalist Protestantism, as his protagonist struggles to reveal and condemn the French-Catholic characters, while at the same time Parker attempts to use the longer history of the French in Canada to distinguish Canada from its two dominant neighbours.

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In the novel, those things which need to be unveiled or explained are often associated with Catholicism, emphasizing distinctions between the Protestant narrator and his surroundings, between the English norm and the French occult.⁶ The convent, partly ruptured by a shell, has a gloomy appearance, so that even Doltaire compares it to a hearse (327). Its air of mystery is further established by the presence of a secret room used for spying and by Robert's description of the Mother Superior as being "like a ghost" and quite "uncanny" (331). Most importantly, though, what needs to be revealed by Robert is the French-Catholic Doltaire's mysterious motivations and trespassing of boundaries, key aspects of gothic novels. In the cathedral, Robert watches Doltaire, "wonder[ing] what new devilry was in his mind" and successfully deducing that the "sneering smile" on Doltaire's face is a sign of his new power as governor. Later, in the convent, Robert spies on Doltaire and Alixe to gain some knowledge of Doltaire's "intentions" (331) and to make sure Doltaire keeps "a decorous distance" from Alixe (335). A common notion of the time, in both Canada and Britain, affiliated Catholicism with sexual perversion (Kinsman 121–22), and Doltaire's actions in the convent, and throughout the novel, seem intended by Parker to repeat or justify these attitudes. Doltaire attempts to excuse men's violence toward women (182) and stresses that the French value intrigue over marriage (183). His actions toward Alixe, in attempting to force himself upon her to sate his own passion—in a holy place, no less—underscore the point further. Robert, as colonial voyeur, needs to seek out such perversion in order to expose it. Rather than Grant's desire to reveal the beauty of French Canada, we have in this element of the convent scene Robert's desire to reveal, and thus overcome, the decadence of France.

However, Robert, as well as Parker's readers, might be implicated in the very perversion being disclosed. Jennifer Blair notes that nineteenth-century confession narratives about the supposed dark goings-on inside Quebec's convents and churches were important in their assertion, by contrast, of Protestant morality, but at the same time such narratives, in speaking about sex, threaten to be as salacious as the perverted confessional where priests allegedly seduced innocent girls. Robert, in spying on Doltaire and Alixe within the convent, enacts a position similar to that of the readers of such tales, who wish to know what their own belief

⁶ Michel Foucault observes that gothic novels, with their "caves, ruined castles and terrifyingly dark and silent convents" represent the opposite of what people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wanted to establish, "the formula of 'power through transparency,' subjection by 'illumination'" (154).

system says should never be known. Doltaire offers to share with Alixe “the splendid secret” (346). This secret’s sexual connotations are evident when Alixe draws back “to the shrine of the Virgin” to protect herself (346) and when Doltaire declares that he “will gather this ripe fruit” and kisses Alixe against her will (344). At such a sight, the blood pounding in Robert’s veins (344) may be a sign of both chivalric aggression on Alixe’s behalf and sadistic titillation at her victimization, reactions he may share with readers.

This possible titillation is key because it hints at Robert’s identification with a Frenchman, an identification in which readers would also be implicated. In looking for national romance, English-Canadian writers created “the vision of Old Quebec as a unified, self-contained world” (111). Gerson’s phrasing here is evocative of the issue of identification associated with the gaze. Lacan, in his theory on the “mirror stage” in children, builds upon Freud’s theorizing about the scopophilic instinct and explains that when children first see themselves in a mirror, they are seeing themselves as whole for the first time and they feel a great sense of their own power (2). Mulvey builds on this idea in relation to film, suggesting that the audience’s gaze upon the female star is unified with that of the male star. Through identifying with the glamorous and powerful male movie star, the viewer is given “a satisfying sense of omnipotence” that Mulvey connects to the encounter with the ego ideal in the mirror stage (20). While we are dealing here with fiction rather than film, the same dynamics of the gaze might apply. That is, Parker uses the historical romance in an attempt to solidify a Canadian identity, drawing upon an image of Quebec to help strengthen the national ego.

This phenomenon is best embodied in Robert’s relationship with Doltaire. I’ve suggested that the novel puts forth a stereotype of French immorality, but this decadence is also often viewed with some degree of admiration, the flip side of the same stereotype. While Robert is associated with seeing, Doltaire is associated with speech, a characteristic which, in Lacanian theory, links him with the authority of the father over the child, which the mirror ideal prefigures. Robert simultaneously loathes and admires the “devilish golden beauty” of Doltaire’s voice (338) and worries that Alixe will not be able to withstand “the alluring eloquence of his frank wickedness” (123). This emphasis on language is perhaps particularly important, as it is one of the “definite” markers between the English and French in Canada, but here it elevates the French, stressing their romantic, although dangerous, appeal. In some ways, Doltaire even seems to be a superior being to Robert: “[H]e had a hundred graces I had

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not, place which I had not, an intellect that ever delighted me, and a will of iron when it was called into action” (331).

If Robert is in the position of spectator or voyeur much of the time, Doltaire represents his active counterpart. In the novel, Robert frequently gazes upon Doltaire gazing at Alixe (7, 319, 332, 338), and Robert also, like Doltaire, gazes upon Alixe’s body, wishing to have her for himself. Robert’s possible identification with Doltaire is intensified by Robert being disguised as a French soldier during the convent scene and perhaps represents a desire for control over French Canada. That is, read allegorically, the scene suggests an English desire for “possession” of French Canada that mirrors France’s control over it.

The problem, though, is that, as in the mirror stage, the self is endangered and fractured by its engagement with the ideal. The fact that children must see themselves as whole only through an external object threatens them, prefiguring the alienation from the self and the engagement with the other that Lacan sees as part of language acquisition (2, 5–6). This is an issue which Mulvey does not take up, although other feminist film critics, such as Jacqueline Rose, have pointed out the paranoia of the gaze, the threat of the subject’s gaze being returned; that is, there is a simultaneous identification with the mirror ideal and a perception of it as other that is threatening. In terms of gendered dynamics, this means that the male can become the object, rather than just the subject, of the gaze, as Mulvey has it, and, indeed, Robert’s heteronormative masculine identity becomes destabilized at times, as I will show. The same holds true for his colonial identity. Bhabha argues that stereotypes of colonized people function in the same way as the mirror stage; in order to define itself, colonial authority must define itself against something, but this means that it is reliant upon the very thing it disavows as different. He points out, “In the objectification of the scopic drive there is always the threatened return of the look; in the identification of the Imaginary relation there is always the alienating other (or mirror) which crucially returns its image to the subject” (Bhabha 116). The construction of francophones in *The Seats of the Mighty* acts as a sort of national “mirror,” the “unified, self-contained world” where the “lack” of English-Canadian identity is controlled—at the same time that the lack is created—through a French reflection.

This threat to anglophones, a product of reliance upon francophones for cultural identity, is present in the novel in that the difference between desire and identification, male and female positions, gazer and gazed at, and British and French starts to unravel (to which Robert’s disguise certainly points). The very fact that the English desire for control over French

Canada is enacted through identification with France hints at France as superior, as stronger, and the fact that Robert's desire for Alixe is enacted through identification with Doltaire's desire for her also suggests the power of Doltaire's confident masculinity and heterosexuality. Moreover, Doltaire's position of power threatens to supercede its identificatory role for Robert and instead to dominate Robert as it threatens to dominate Alixe. In the scene in the cathedral, Doltaire does as much gazing as Robert: "He seemed to sweep the church with a glance. Nothing could have escaped that swift, searching look. His eyes were even raised to where I was, so that I involuntarily drew back, though I knew he could not see me" (320). Here Doltaire, as French, literally returns the look and indirectly stresses that the English construction of self is dependent upon the other. Moreover, it is not merely that the binaried positions are inverted in the novel; the very categories begin to blur as characters occupy more than one position simultaneously. Later, in the convent, Robert is hidden behind a wall that has on it a tapestry of the Virgin Mary. Alixe gazes at the tapestry, looking for strength, and Doltaire glances at it too, "as if he saw and was interested in the struggle in her" (332). Doltaire looks to a tapestry with the image of a woman on it, behind which is Robert, in order to understand Alixe; the positions of Alixe and Robert begin to blur.

At other times, the play of looks between Doltaire and Robert suggests that the superior male can become an object of desire for the male looker as well as a substitute for the self. As I have noted, at the convent Robert notices Alixe's arm coming out of the white lace of her black sleeve (a possible sexual symbol). Later, in the cathedral, Robert notices Doltaire "dressed scrupulously in black, with a little white lace showing at the wrists and neck" and he comments, "A handsomer figure it would be hard to see" (320). Robert views Doltaire as a temptation for Alixe, but Robert's language sometimes stresses that he is tempted by Doltaire himself. While Doltaire tries to woo Alixe in the convent, Robert explains to the reader, "I felt it; he possessed her like some spirit; and I understood it, for the devilish golden beauty of his voice was like music" (338). As in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories about erotic triangles, Robert and Doltaire's competition for Alixe is as much, if not more, about their relationship to each other as it is about Alixe, and such comments by Robert indicate how the homosocial slips into the homoerotic.

In fact, the play of looking back and forth between the two men, in these and other scenes, would have been particularly fraught in Parker's lifetime, following the clinical definition of homosexuality in the 1880s and the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895. As Steven Maynard notices, around

and after the turn of the century in Canada, police were engaging in voyeuristic practices, under the term “surveillance,” in order to capture men engaged in same-sex practices in public places. Similarly, Robert’s observation of Doltaire’s self-absorption, and Doltaire’s meticulous attention to his appearance, might be intended to evoke for the turn-of-the-century reader the stereotype of the narcissistic homosexual. One can read here, then, a reflection of what Gary Kinsman describes as a tendency “to blame ‘foreign’ cultures for perversions” (122) and of the connection Sedgwick observes in gothic fiction between homosexuality and the non-British other (182). However, if Robert is also captivated by Doltaire’s attractiveness and power, he becomes himself implicated in such “queer” behaviour. Although Robert’s gaze upon Doltaire is an attempt to expose and reveal him, in order to control him, his attraction to Doltaire and desire to identify with him leaves him in a place of ambivalence, where his own cultural and sexual identity is tenuous. Such a place, as I have suggested, might be that of English-Canadian readers and writers at the turn of the century, who want to identify with francophone culture in order to define English-Canadian selfhood, while still maintaining English-Canadian Protestant dominance.

Moreover, Robert wants to defeat and identify with Doltaire, but he may also desire being defeated by him. Mary Ann Doane has pointed out the temptation toward self-annihilation inherent in Lacan’s theories of the gaze, the simultaneous stabilizing and de-stabilizing of the self. As the gaze can become something situated outside oneself, there can be a desire for a loss of differentiation, a merging with one’s surroundings that Doane associates with the death wish (84–85). Doltaire, as immoral and decadent and seductive, evokes in others this desire for a loss of boundaries, and this is perhaps what makes him so fascinating, and so dangerous, to both Robert and Alixe, and to Parker’s readers. Doltaire, a French male that Robert desires in various ways, threatens Robert’s heteronormative, British male self. The portrayal of Doltaire as an almost-irresistible, sexualized devil points to what Parker might have viewed as the degradation via decadence of French civilization at the time of the novel’s setting. However, Doltaire’s portrayal also hints at the vulnerability of English civilization to such decadent influence and temptation in Parker’s own era, where the violence and magnitude of imperialism created “the nightmare of being swallowed by the world’s dark places” but also the greedy “fantasy of swallowing the world” (Brantlinger 247), and in Canadian gothic fiction, according to Justin D. Edwards, “the fears of losing one’s true self are central” (xvii). That is, the relationship between Doltaire and Robert

points to the colonial fear of being, and perhaps also a desire to be, no different from the other.

This ambivalence, though, does not mean that the novel is ultimately subversive. McClintock argues that “The staging of symbolic disorder by the privileged can merely preempt challenges by those who do not possess the power to stage ambiguity with comparable license or authority” (69). While Parker fetishistically toys with Robert in feminine positions, with being looked at, and with desiring the male other, the overall trajectory of the narrative overcomes such moments. It is not unusual for gothic fiction to present moments of social transgression, only to end with the triumph of order and conventionality, but the national ramifications of this in Parker’s novel are particularly revealing. What he effects through the love-story plot (the erotic relationship between Robert and Alixe) and the gothic (the mysteriousness and boundary crossing of some of the settings and characters) is a distinguishing of French Canadians from the French, a re-mapping of the former’s identity. It is the kind of complete distinction that Parker does not, purposefully, make between anglophones. I would like to turn now to the love story, through which, by again employing scopophilia, Parker soothes the uncertainties of identity that he evokes in the gothic.

Robert and Alixe’s relationship contains motifs found in many other love stories: lovers torn apart by external forces must endeavour to find each other again; the innocent young girl grows into “womanhood” through her love of an older man; the beauty of the heroine; the bravery of the hero. At one point Doltaire appears aware of the clichés when he scoffs that the relationship between Robert and Alixe is “founded upon the old-fashioned romance of ill-used captive and soft-hearted maid” (334).

It is partly through this love story that the ambivalence of Robert’s colonial position is eventually exorcized; through gazing at and understanding Alixe, he controls the uncertainty about identity and power that Doltaire evokes. That is, the gothic uncertainties evoked by Doltaire are demystified in relation to Alixe; the gender hierarchy allows Robert to secure the sexual and cultural control not possible through Doltaire. I’ve already referred to Robert’s fetishizing of Alixe, and this process is part of a strategy of containment. Mulvey points out that the sight of a woman displayed as an erotic object is often over-valued, idealized, in an attempt to re-cover the phallic mother the child lost with the realization of sexual difference. Thus, the woman as an object of the gaze, as a fetish, “always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (Mulvey 21). One of the ways the male unconscious can escape this is through “re-enactment of

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subversive.

the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery)” (Mulvey 21). However, Janet Bergstrom revises Mulvey’s theory, clarifying that it is the woman’s desire, not merely her image, that is the object of investigation and control for the male character (180).

Similarly, one of the things that is on the line in the convent scene is the ownership of Alixe’s desire. As Daniel Coleman puts it, “Will Quebec prefer corrupt, urbane French rule or honest, single-minded British power?” (194). Throughout the scene, Robert “reads” Alixe’s body for signs of her allegiance to him or Doltaire, her morality or her temptation. Robert takes note of what Alixe is wearing, her movements from one part of the room to another, the simple gesture of raising a handkerchief to her mouth, and the look in her eyes at various times, as ways of reading “the great struggle in her” (414). Through his spying, Robert comes to know, completely, that Alixe is his in her refutation of Doltaire’s advances. Just as he *sees* in her movement toward Doltaire that she is tempted by him, Robert *sees* in the next moment, in the expressions on Alixe’s and Doltaire’s faces, that his rival has lost his grip on Alixe (339). Robert does not need to take action, and he has, in a sense, triumphed via watching and knowing. As Alixe wrote to him in a letter earlier, “I have bared my heart to thee. I have hidden nothing” (202).

Robert’s surveillance of Alixe is part of a wider dialogue in the nineteenth century on the “demystification” of women. Valverde, in a discussion of prostitution at the turn of the century, observes, “Canadian reformers believed that they could distinguish ‘fallen’ from what they called ‘unfallen’ girls at a glance” by observing their dress, posture, and so on (78), and part of Robert’s project in spying is to similarly determine whether or not Alixe has been seduced into immorality. However, Robert’s spying on her is not just about maintaining gendered ideals; rather, it is also important to the imperial project, as much so as his surveillance of Doltaire; in fact, the former surveillance manages to help repress the ambivalences of the latter. Many critics, such as McClintock, Doane, and E. Ann Kaplan, going where Mulvey and Bhabha do not, have noted the inherent connection between the patriarchal and colonial gazes and the special position of the colonized woman. McClintock comments, “All too often, colonials represented the colonized landscape as feminine, unknowable and unrepresentable.[...] Constructing women and colonized people as a riddle (‘the Woman Question,’ ‘the Native Question’) allows privileged European men to answer the riddle in terms of their own interests” (193). In *The Seats of the Mighty*, Robert’s answer to both riddles, as he gazes upon Alixe in order to know her heart and mind and body, involves the subordination of Quebec via

Alixé's gendered subordination to him through the love story. Figuring cultural hierarchy in this way is common in early Canadian fiction, as Gerson notices (120), although Parker's recurring use of voyeuristic motifs entrenches the point even further. Whereas Doltaire threatens Robert's subjectivity for the reasons noted above, Alixe, as woman, as Quebec, is given a different treatment in the novel—eventually positioned and formatted as readable, as safe.

This doesn't mean she is passive, of course, a fact critics have noticed but not adequately explained. Throughout the novel, Alixe proves herself to be clever and confident, verbally sparring with Doltaire and manipulating politicians in order to save Robert's life. There are even moments when she threatens the gendered hierarchy, as when she cross-dresses as a soldier to visit Robert in prison. Such incidents would seem to position Alixe as more than a mere object of the masculine gaze, but, as Mulvey points out, the desired and glamorous woman in film narrative is often eventually subordinated to the hero when she falls in love with him (21), and in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" Mulvey argues that in films where female protagonists seem to take on "masculine" characteristics, such characteristics usually have to be repressed for the sake of the woman's own survival in a patriarchal society (36). In *The Seats of the Mighty*, this hierarchy is also eventually reified, and Alixe is eventually denied the ambivalence of Doltaire's relationship with Robert. To choose Doltaire would be to choose a love of power over morality, which would compromise her femininity in terms of the nineteenth-century gender paradigm.

However, Alixe's gumption is actually a key element in the plot, wherein she chooses to marry the British invader rather than a notable characteristic inharmoniously subsumed in a conventional ending. This aspect of her character might have contributed to the novel's appeal for Parker's readers because her marriage is even more of a conquest and erases culpability on behalf of the British as oppressors. McClintock explains how the feminizing of non-British people allowed imperial authority to use the familial hierarchy to naturalize other kinds of hierarchy (45). Thus, the British could portray themselves as generous fathers ruling feminized and infantilized nations (McClintock 45). In the same way, in *The Seats of the Mighty*, rather than Britain striding in as the conqueror, it is only a peaceful lover, wanting what is best for French Canada. As Robert reasons behind the tapestry, "She must make her choice out of her own heart and spirit, and fight this fight alone" (331–32). Alixe, as French Canada, must be allowed enough agency to choose her own oppression.

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As a representative of French Canada in a love-story plot, Alixe must not, for Parker's nationalist purposes, remain in the gothic convent; her choices there are either stagnation, and never fulfilling her role as national foremother, or seduction by Doltaire, and succumbing to European French decadence and immorality. William Kirby, in another novel about the "fall" of Quebec, *The Golden Dog* (1877), dooms his French-Canadian heroine to death in a convent, a tragic representation of the fate of her culture. Parker, though, rather than killing off Alixe, has her escape the convent to eventually end up living happily ever after with a British Canadian, tidily closing up the marriage metaphor of the romance and defeating the gothic horror and seduction that threatens her, and Robert, in the form of Doltaire. At the same time, the fact that Alixe was ever tempted by Doltaire points to the need for the moral English patriarch to continue to be a positive influence over Quebec; thus, Doltaire's gothic presence was likewise necessary, not just for readerly titillation but to confirm English superiority.

However, while Alixe's choice of lovers is significant, Robert's choice of lovers is just as important, another issue which critics have failed to explore. In fact, the homoerotics of Robert's relationship with Doltaire, and the temptation of imperial decadence that Doltaire represents, are scourged by Robert's relationship with Alixe. He turns away from the illicitness of Doltaire on both accounts and claims Alixe instead. Sedgwick points out that, in Western societies, the continuum of male bonds, from the homosexual to the homosocial, is violently severed (5), an issue reflected in gothic representations of empire, where characters are anxious to distinguish between homosocial and heterosexual desire, between passivity and activity, between the un-English other and the English self (189). In Parker's novel, Robert eventually distinguishes between homoerotics and decadence and the foreign other on one hand and heteroerotics and morality and domesticity on the other. The former he attributes to the French, and the latter to French Canadians. That is, he domesticates what is potentially foreign in order to control it. This is what must have made Parker's novel so fascinating to its early readers; Doltaire is excessively charming and dangerously appealing, but his danger is eventually made "safe," his old-world French eloquence is embodied and domesticated in adoring Alixe. Crucially, Parker achieves what British authors could not, because Robert can achieve in Canada what cannot be achieved by the British in Europe: the control and subordination of the French. Robert acts out the fantasies of his fatherland by conquering its ancient enemy. So, in fact, it is Robert's choice that may be the central one of the novel; he has his own temptations, as much as he displaces them onto Alixe. Anxieties

about the return of the gaze, about the reliance on idealized francophones, evoked through Doltaire, seem done away with via the heteronormative love story.

While the love story subordinates French Canada through allegory, other aspects of the novel's ending help emphasize the same point. At the end of the novel, the uncertainty of the gothic moments appears to have disappeared, and all of those mysterious Catholic churches, the gothic settings, have been literally weakened by British attacks and lay exposed to the eye. After the final battle, Robert walks through the city, this time openly gazing at his surroundings, where before he had walked as a prisoner (367). He notices a "shattered church" and British flags now flying near the Bishop's palace (367), underlining the novel's anti-Catholicism through representations of a ruptured Catholic authority. Most importantly, though, Doltaire has been killed in an explosion. While Robert's notice of the "noble peace" of Doltaire's body might indicate respect and even affection (373), the fact that Doltaire is lying dead under the French flag emphasizes the end of French rule in Canada. Even more significantly, his "fine eyes" are closed (373), eradicating his ability to return Robert's gaze; Doltaire-as-corpse becomes the ultimate passive object of the gaze. While there is some trace of homoeroticism left here, it is ultimately foreclosed by Robert's departure from Doltaire's body to locate Alixe. Moreover, Robert's freedom and Doltaire's death indicate that the former has become the active male, taking the place of the mirror ideal. The theme of the conquest is reinforced at the end of the novel when Alixe and Robert reunite in the hills above the town, their happiness, and what Robert *sees*, a reflection of the new state of the nation: "A pleasant green valley lay to the north, and to the south, far off, was the wall of rosy hills that hid the captured town. Peace was upon it all, and upon us" (376).

The novel's ending, though, is not simply a repression of anxieties about the possible power of the colonized but a displacement of anxiety about the decadence of English imperialism onto the European French. Parker, who traveled back and forth between Britain and its English-speaking colonies in his lifetime, would have been well aware of *fin-de-siècle* worries about imperialism overstretching its bounds and weakening, rather than strengthening, England (the "greedy fantasy of swallowing the world" that Brantlinger mentions). Parker, in looking back at an earlier conflict in *The Seats of the Mighty*, demonstrates the consequences for a conquering society that is too decadent and thus brings about its own demise. Rather than this ultimately being a cautionary tale for Parker's British/American/Canadian audiences, however, it seems only intended to

justify the eradication of French rule in Canada, a demonstration of “bad imperialism” against “good imperialism.” Parker attempts to create, and thus control, the mysteries and corruptions of the French. While some moments in the novel indicate that imperial authority may also be gazed upon by the francophone other, the end of the novel, partly through the love story, ultimately defeats the gothic French male.

In fact, what Parker effects is a severing of French Canada from the French homeland, through the attribution of different characteristics to each. It’s a process very similar to the treatment of Native peoples in Canada and their division into categories such as “noble savage” and “bloodthirsty cannibals.” That is, the processes of colonization in relation to indigenous peoples are applied in Parker’s novel to another European culture in order to similarly justify British rule. Bhabha argues that colonial stereotypes can be contradictory. For example, “The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child,” and so on. Such contradictions, though, are crucial to the maintenance of colonial power: “In each case what is being dramatized is a separation—*between* races, cultures, histories, *within* histories—a separation between *before* and *after* that repeats obsessively the mythical moment of disjunction” (118). Through the employment of surveillance, all the things that Robert observes and reports about francophones, *The Seats of the Mighty* constructs a visible distinction, not just between French and English traits but between French and French-Canadian traits. The novel divides French authority figures such as the Intendant and the Bishop who tries to annul the marriage between Alixe and Robert, from sympathetic lower-class characters such as Gabord, Robert’s jailer, and Mathilde, a victim of Bigot’s debauchery. Doltaire, as the son of the king and a French peasant, occupies an interesting space in this dynamic, potentially somewhere between the two “types.” However, it is for this reason that he most of all embodies the racist view of the French and that his death is so crucial; as a crosser of boundaries, and a product of the immorality of his king, he, above all, must be eradicated. Therefore, it is again not just that the gothic moments are brought forth for purposes of titillation: they function to distinguish and condemn the French, to differentiate them from French Canadians.

At the end of the novel, Robert sees British soldiers sharing rations with the French-Canadian peasantry, who have been nearly starved to death by their own government (369). Such representations of history in the novel also help provide a justification for the severance of French

Canadians from France. After the “fall” of Quebec, the francophones who remain can be romanticized, while the portrait of the European French demonstrates the continuing importance of keeping French Canadians in line so that they don’t follow the same fate. Alixe notices that if it weren’t for her love of Robert, she might become as corrupt as Doltaire’s mistress, Madame Cournal (151), and, crucially, she marries Robert in a Protestant, rather than a Catholic, ceremony, hinting at a further repudiation of the latter religion and perhaps implying that Protestantism will help maintain cultural, sexual, and gendered order in the nation. The colonial stereotype is divided here between the debauched French and the somewhat assimilable, romantic French Canadians, the before and after, in a sense, of the “fall” of Quebec.

Coleman views Robert as exhibiting “New World civility,” which distinguishes him and Alixe from the corruptions of the old world, while Robert’s Scottish background means that the couple bypasses “the hegemony of Englishness” (194). However, it is crucial that in *The Seats of the Mighty*, writing from his imperialist perspective, Parker does not create the same severance between Canada and Britain that he does between Canada and France. No corrupt Englishmen appear to distinguish the English-speaking Canadian male from the British male; Robert can be both British and a Canadian. Through Alixe, who possesses some of the same eloquence and beauty Doltaire possesses, without his immorality, the cultural distinctiveness of French Canada is subordinated and appropriated, distinguishing Canada, without undoing a sense of anglophone dominance. It is important in this respect that Robert is narrator, as the power of speech evinced by the francophone characters is always contained and contextualized by an anglophone. Similarly, Parker creates a piece of “Canadian” literature, drawing on the “romance” of Old Quebec, without ever departing from popular English forms and affiliations. Parker attempts to create an ideal imaginary national self as English Canada confronts threats to its coherence and violently enters into both “literariness” and “nationality.”

I have been examining the novel with an eye to the linear unfolding of its narrative, so that the ending carries a great deal of significance, as this is where the problems raised primarily by Doltaire are resolved. That said, Bhabha has noted that one of the key characteristics of the colonial stereotype is that it must constantly be repeated; what is a matter of “common sense” about the colonial other can never be reiterated enough (94–95). The same might be said of the representations of the French and French Canadians in Parker’s novel. The anxiety inherent to the English Protestant’s colonial situation in Canada requires a constant repetition of

The colonial stereotype is divided here between the debauched French and the somewhat assimilable, romantic French Canadians.

such images, perhaps explaining why Parker's novel has been published so many times (by at least five different publishers in his lifetime, as well as Tecumseh, McClelland and Stewart, and several small presses later on) on top of being transformed into a play and film. In a broader context, this need for repetition might also explain the large number of historical romances in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that took as their subject French Canada and the popularity of such a genre among anglophone readers.

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