Shattered Masculinity and Violence in Walker Percy's *Lancelot*: Apocalypse Now

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Abstract: *Although it is not one of Walker Percy's most popular novels,* Lancelot *is certainly one of his most complicated. Critics such as Simone Vauthier and Maria Hebert have discussed the masculinity of protagonist Lancelot Lamar in depth, building on theories linking Lamar's shattered masculinity to male homosocial behaviour, particularly the homosocial relationships between Lamar and Merlin and Lamar and Percival. Critical discussions leave out, however, an exploration of the violence that pervades the entire text. This is problematic because Lamar's dissatisfaction with the homosocial roles in the triangulated relationships created by his wife's affair is what sparks his obsession with violence as a cleansing act. His wife's lover is not manly enough for Lamar, shattering Lamar's sense of masculinity and enraging him. As the narrative progresses, it becomes filled with his vision for the future – a world brought on by the apocalypse where women are sexually pure and men are "pure in heart." Lamar clearly regards violence as the only way to restore the patriarchal order that his experience of triangulated relationships has thwarted.*

The protagonist of Walker Percy's 1977 novel *Lancelot* is Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, an unreliable narrator telling his story from inside a mental institution, and his jumbled narrative weaves back and forth between the present and the past. In the present, he tells his story to his childhood friend Percival: the story he tells hinges on the infidelity of his wife, Margot, and a subsequent awakening of sorts that leads him to blow up the family home, thereby killing Margot; her lover, Jacoby; and two other actors in the film that movie director Bob Merlin is making at Belle Isle. This destruction, however, does not seem to satisfy Lamar; as he tells Percival his story, his narrative becomes filled with asides regarding his vision for the future – a world where the "best of women will be what we used to call ladies[.] [...] The men? The best of them will be strong and brave and pure of heart, not for Christ's sake, but like an Apache youth or a Lacedemonian who denies himself to be strong" (165). In this vision, Lamar's main requirement for women is sexual purity, that which makes them, in his estimation, "ladies." But

men have other responsibilities, and these responsibilities betray a preoccupation with hegemonic masculinity's valorization of strength, dominance, and discipline – what he refers to as being "pure of heart." In other words, even after the destruction of his family home, Lamar desires to further pursue violence in order to return the world to a place where gender identity and gender roles are clearly delineated, and he plans a kind of apocalypse in order to restore America to this patriarchal order. In my assessment, however, Lamar's homosocial bonds with other men spur his use of violence in the first place, and this violence does not re-masculinize him per his expectations. This is the reason that he seeks to reaffirm his homosocial bond with old friend Harry Percival while casting an ever more violent vision for the future, never realizing, as will Percival, that this violence will always undermine his gender identity though purporting to reinforce it.

In his murderous destruction of Belle Isle and his vision of apocalypse, Lamar is in line with one prevailing principle about violence: that men are overwhelmingly responsible for committing it. Michael Kimmel observes in his book *Angry White Men* that the "one single intractable gender difference that holds across virtually all societies is that the overwhelming majority – in the range of 90 percent – of the world's violence is committed by men" (120). In support of this, Francis Beesley and James McGuire, in an article in *Psychology, Crime and Law*, found a correlation between violent crime offence and high scores on a hypermasculinity index. Often associated with machismo, hypermasculinity is an over-emphasis of masculine ideals such as "physical strength or power, aggressiveness, risk-taking, emotional control, and sexual potency" (Beesley and McGuire 251). The prevalence of this maschismo leads men and boys to be overly concerned with control, power, and dominance, so that socialization in hypermasculinity begins early. However, hypermasculinity and machismo are not born in a vacuum. They are, of course, socially constructed ideals, and the study of masculinities explains a great deal about how these ideals are created and reinforced within cultures.

In the early days of gender theory, patriarchy and hegemony became buzzwords in relation to masculinity, but the monolithic nature of these two terms tends to elide the possibility of non-hegemonic and non-patriarchal masculinities. Now, however, theorists such as James Messerschmidt agree that hegemonic masculinity is not a stable discourse on manhood but, rather, a fluid concept that changes based on time and place: "In fact, hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity to which other types of masculinity are subordinated, not eliminated, and it provides the primary basis for relationships among men" (130). In other words, where there is a hegemonic masculinity – a discourse about manhood that dominates cultural perceptions of masculinity – there are also other non-hegemonic masculinities that are subordinated but never fully repressed or eliminated. Often, these competing discourses are associated with certain economic class, racial or ethnic origin, and sexuality. And, occasionally, as in the case of the evolution of British "manliness," forces combine to subvert the dominant gender ideal with one that had been formerly repressed.[1] However, despite these competing (and sometimes repressed) ideals, hegemonic masculinity remains the primary premise upon which gender identity is established, and men and boys are thus pressured to navigate its pre-existing conventions and expectations. That men must either conform to or transgress gender expectations in their navigation of hegemonic masculinity leads theorists to acknowledge both the fluidity of gender identity as well as gender's thoroughgoing performativity. This is the basis for my discussion of Lamar in Percy's *Lancelot*, who commits violence in an attempt to re-establish a masculine identity that has been undermined.

Sociologists agree that violence is primarily committed by men, yet, in studies of masculinities in literature, the connection between violence and

[1] A number of theorists, including Kimmel, have traced the shifting valorization of masculinity towards an exteriorized emphasis on hard bodies and physical discipline. This kind of masculinity, however, recognized by many as the dominant version of manhood today, was once viewed as subordinate to the formerly dominant iteration of manliness that emphasized the wealthy, aristocratic version of manhood prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

manhood has been surprisingly under-discussed. In American literature, male characters have utilized violence to police others' masculinity and to perform their own manhood in a variety of situations; a closer look at the body of American literature shows characters using aggression in a manner consistent with this idea. Indeed, some of the most famous works in the American literary tradition – from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, to Ernest Hemingway's body of work, to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* – include characters who famously deploy violence in an attempt to restore some part of a masculine role they feel they are unable to perform. In his discussion of nineteenth-century male writers in *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, David Leverenz argues that these authors' "best work takes fire from complex feelings about male rivalry for dominance" (5). He, too, points out that "any intensified ideology of manhood is a compensatory response to fears of humiliation" (4).

This tradition in the American literary canon of hypermasculine male characters is continued and intensified in American literature of the twentieth century, where male characters utilize male homosociality as a way of policing their own manhood. Michael S. Allen, in "Male Bonding in American Literature," notes that the American canon is "obsessed with male identity, power, purpose, and bonding" (26). His fascinating argument claims that American male writers essentially created and reinforced the ideal of male bonding, which serves the purpose of protecting men from violence – while simultaneously begetting more violence. He ties the threat of violence (and its corollary, male bonding) to anxiety over masculine identity (26–27), and I believe this relationship highlights how cultures socialize men to police each other's performances of masculinity in ways that ultimately lead to violent behaviour. A closer look at *Lancelot* finds a male character committing violence in a manner consistent with these principles. I argue that, in Percy's novel, elements of homosocial performance and triangulation lead Lancelot Lamar to commit an act of aggression in order to recuperate his ability to fulfil a masculine ideal. Ultimately, however, his violence

fails to restore his shattered manhood, and Lamar must decide whether to continue pursuing the masculine code to which he has subscribed or to adapt to a new one.

Although it is not Percy's best-known work, *Lancelot* still retains critical interest as, in Michael Kobre's estimation, "Percy's most complicated book" (165). Critics such as Kobre tend to read the novel as an expression of "the conflict in [Percy's] own writing between the dialogic novelist and the moralist," as well as "the dangers of moral zeal" (167). C.E. Smith calls it Percy's "darkest" work, reflective of his ongoing crisis of faith (385), while Kieran Quinlan, in his monograph on the author, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*, argues that "the novel can be seen as an intense dialogue between the Catholic and Stoic positions" (156). Other criticism of *Lancelot*, however, tends to veer away from the author's religious, moral, or philosophical intentions in order to train a spotlight on some of the novel's other issues. Smith, for example, though noting *Lancelot*'s religious preoccupations, emphasizes the text as an expression of the author's interests in semiotics, drawing a parallel between Percy's belief in a triadic model of language (the idea that the signifier and signified require an index or interpreter) and the actual sexual triangles in which Lamar becomes an unwilling participant (389–90). Meanwhile, in "Mimesis and Violence in *Lancelot*," Simone Vauthier links the novel to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, arguing that much of Lamar's struggle is born from his desires, which are mimetic by nature and thus inevitably produce conflict. Vauthier sums it up succinctly, pointing out that, in "receiving and sending a multiplicity of contradictory signs, which urge and forbid imitation, men are caught in the vicious circle of rivalry and violence" (84). Her analysis of this violence is useful as a starting point for an exploration of Lamar's struggle with gender roles in general and his masculine identity in particular.

Critics in the last two decades have begun to take notice of the novel's issues surrounding gender identity. Lauren Sewell Coulter, for instance, takes a closer look at why Lamar allows Merlin, his wife's initial lover, to escape the destruction

of Belle Isle. Coulter argues that Lamar wants Merlin to leave Belle Isle and to survive its planned destruction because Lamar identifies with his wife's former lover and has bonded with him (106). Coulter is essentially correct, but her conclusion lacks the depth that a careful application of gender theory provides. I argue that exploring the relationship between Lamar and Merlin, in light of the protagonist's need for validation in his masculinity, reveals a more complex reason for Merlin's pardon than simply identification and affection. Maria Hebert, in "Between Men: Homosocial Desire in Walker Percy's *Lancelot*," looks even more closely at the relationships between the novel's male characters, especially between Lamar and the man whom Lamar calls Percival, a priest who serves as both friend and confessor and has likely experienced a crisis of faith. Hebert's argument (as the title of her essay indicates) rests on Eve Sedgwick's theorization of homosociality, and Hebert also credits Vauthier with having good insight into the repercussions of Lamar's desire to bond with Percival. She points out, however, that Vauthier's analysis falls short by not acknowledging "Lance's actions as an expression of homosocial desire for Percival and the way this desire shapes his fear of women" (Hebert 127). Hebert is absolutely correct in naming Lamar's desire for Percival as the driving force behind his fear of women and desire to negate them. Lamar needs Percival to validate the masculine identity he hopes to establish in the restored patriarchal order he envisions. But the homosocial nature of this relationship inevitably complicates Lamar's association of masculinity with violence. Significantly, Lamar uses violence in an attempt to re-establish his gendered identity and fails; he then projects a radically violent vision for the future in order to achieve a masculinity that is less complicated and easier to reinforce. Ultimately, however, Lamar's relationships with Merlin and Percival will thwart his vision for a future restoration of patriarchy because his connection to them complicates his pursuit of violence.

Masculine Deeds

Lamar explains early on that he has a clearly defined trajectory for establishing his manhood, one that begins with his birth. It is therefore appropriate to begin an analysis of the novel's masculine identities with a discussion of its characters' names. Bestowed at birth, names serve as a primary source of identity, and, in *Lancelot*, where characters' monikers are the stuff of legends, the power of naming is evident. Many of the characters, such as Lancelot, Percival, Merlin, and Janos Jacoby, are given appellations that are familiar to readers and invoke powerful ideals. Lancelot, Percival, and Merlin, for example, are well-known figures in the stories of King Arthur's court. Janos Jacoby, on the other hand, is named for Janus, the Roman god of transitions, often depicted as having two faces as he looks to both the past and the future.[2]

The importance of these names pivots on their association with mythic greatness and an ideal of chivalry. In a recent essay titled "Moral Chivalry and the Arthurian Revival," Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack claim that Percy drew on a robust Americanization of Tennysonian-influenced Arthurian myths that reinforced a notion of chivalry as based on morality and character rather than a British ideal related to class (21). However, as John Bugge points out in "Arthurian Myth Devalued in Walker Percy's *Lancelot*," much of Percy's reliance on Arthurian material is ironic. The mythic names on which Lamar puts so much value as invoking associations of greatness are ultimately devalued, as the novel relies on Arthurian themes while infusing them with negative, even subversive, meanings.[3]

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[2] Vauthier discusses the power of naming for Lamar with regards to his two rivals, Janos Jacoby and Bob Merlin. She rightly suggests that Jacoby's name links him to the narrator, who is both "backward and forward-looking" (94); Merlin, however, despite Lamar's obsession with his and Percival's names, fails to elicit comment from Lamar.

[3] Bugge's article offers a thorough explanation of *Lancelot*'s connection to Arthurian myth, highlighting how characters and places in the novel resemble Arthurian archetypes, though Lamar may not realize the extent of these similarities; for example, Lancelot du Lac also goes through a period of insanity after Guinevere rejects him, paralleling Lamar's institutionalization. He concludes that Lamar's identity, actions, and vision for the future rely on impersonating a myth he ultimately does not fully understand. Arthur W. Wilhelm, in his essay "Moviemaking and the Mythological Framework of Walker Percy's *Lancelot*," adds additional context, looking more closely at the mythic allusions of the novel's minor characters as well as Bob Merlin's connection to his namesake.

Accordingly, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar is named after a sixteenth-century Anglican bishop who served the church in the days of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, though he jokes that he should have been named for "Lancelot du Lac, King Ban of Benwick's son" (4). This Arthurian Lancelot served as one of King Arthur's knights, alongside Sir Percival, and Lamar claims at one point that Sirs Lancelot and Percival were "the only two to see the Grail" (162). Percival, meanwhile – whose given name is Harry and who, as a Catholic priest, goes by Father John – is given various nicknames that link him to a heritage of traditionally manly and honourable men: Harry Hotspur, Prince Hal, Northumberland, and John the Baptist (6). This is important for two reasons. First, it highlights that Percival, an almost entirely silent character in the novel, is also on a quest: we learn from Lamar that Percival converted to Catholicism after a rather rowdy and promiscuous youth; after returning from missionary work in Biafra, seemingly disillusioned with his faith, Percival is positioned to either vindicate or invalidate Lamar's radical vision of violence. Second, we see that Lamar clearly values the heritage behind Percival's many nicknames, associating their mythic qualities with other famous generals and rulers of lore: "What we are is the best of you, Percival," he tells his friend, "and the best of me, Lancelot, and of Lee and Richard and Saladin and Leonidas and Hector and Agamemnon and Richthofen and Charlemagne and Clovis and Martel" (163). What this valuation suggests about Lamar is his tendency to invoke an idea of chivalric masculinity that he clearly associates with success in war, with bravery and valour, and with both physical and sexual prowess. This chivalric code clearly delineates women's roles as well, holding up the traditional lady as a gendered ideal, which becomes important later on in the novel.[4]

For Lamar himself, manhood is rooted in the ability to perform great deeds, and he articulates this sensibility early in the novel: "I achieved my single small

[4] Lamar has this to say about women: "The best of women will be what we used to call ladies, like your Virgin, Our Lady" (165). He holds the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, to be the epitome of a woman's gendered identity, valuing sexual purity as a sign of adherence to traditional gender roles.

immortality at the age of twenty-one when I caught an Alabama punt standing on the back line of the end zone and ran it 110 yards for a touchdown. It is still on the record books as the longest punt return in history. The beauty is, it always will be – it can't be surpassed" (11). But, by flagging the singularity of this immortal deed that he alleges can never be surpassed, Lamar acknowledges the flaws in his performance of masculinity. While it is true that his deed will have great importance to him and to other men while he lives, the fact that his "single small immortality" occurred so far back in his youth indicates his reliance on past, rather than present, assertions of masculinity. Lamar goes on to point out his physical prowess – "I was also Golden Gloves runner-up and though I weighed only 170 could take anybody on the football team" (11) – as well as his intelligence, which he insists was valued above all else by the same football team he claims he could handily dominate (10). Together, Lamar's immortal deed, physical prowess, and intelligence suggest his pre-eminence in college. More than this, however, they express Lamar's adherence to an American tradition of masculinity that performs manhood through aggression, discipline, athleticism, strength, and intelligence.

But these are not the only characteristics Lamar associates with masculine performance. Lamar often relates his past sexual exploits with Percival – he notes, for example, that they frequented whorehouses together (10) – yet the early part of the novel fails to elaborate on his youthful sexual promiscuity, instead veering off into a contemplation of why his wife's affair is of such importance to him. This lack of elaboration suggests that Lamar values other masculine characteristics in himself as primary avenues for performing manhood. Sex, while important, was not initially integral to his gendered identity.

Masculinity Undermined

Lamar explains to Percival that, at some point (and he is not entirely sure when), his performance of manhood began to slip, though he can trace a clear trajectory "downhill all the way" since college (25). This trajectory coincides with Lamar's

discovery of his wife's infidelity. At this point, Lamar feels he has been lulled to sleep in his performance of masculinity and links his sexual complacency to a compromised manhood. While his narration occasionally (and dismissively) suggests fractures in his masculine identity, Lamar also articulates what seem like gaping holes in his performance of manhood. For example, early in his story, Lamar discusses the catalyst for his destructive actions – the pricking of what he calls "the worm of interest" (17) – which occurs when he realizes that his daughter's blood type effectively rules out his paternity, but, here, Lamar, as is his wont, prevaricates. His tone as he looks back on his earlier self, so completely uninterested in the good life he led, is condescending. He jokes, for example, that he was "discharged from the army not bloody and victorious and battered by Sir Turquine but with persistent diarrhea" (24). And, since we already know how much Lamar values deeds of war, this wry comment on his medical discharge hints at his feelings of failure. His only recourse is to return to Belle Isle and sit by the river drinking.

The sense of historical inevitability here is clear, reinforcing the link Lamar feels to his past and his ancestors, established when he tries to draw Percival into his story, pointing out that both of their ancestral lines (which he conflates with himself and Percival personally) "lived from one great event to another, tragic events, triumphant events, with years of melancholy in between" (20). In suggesting that they historically pass their time by eliding the quotidian minutiae of ordinary life in favour of jumping from one significant event to another, Lamar links himself to an older age, and he gestures towards his hope for its restoration in the future. Lamar follows this narrative pattern throughout the novel, his dissatisfaction with the present motivating his interest in the past and fantasy for the future. In pointing out his inability to perform great deeds in battle and the embarrassing reason for his military discharge, Lamar reveals an insecurity about his masculine performance and a heightened sense of his own incapacity, a shortcoming he connects to his ancestral tendencies towards dishonour. He thus

seeks out his next major historical event, which may perhaps offer the possibility of redemption.

Lamar is awakened to his compromised masculinity when he begins to question his daughter's blood type. A later scene, which takes place on the same night, further emphasizes this awareness. First, Lamar does not recognize his reflection in the mirror and analyzes it as he would a stranger, noting that he sees "a man gone to seed" (58). When he finally recognizes his reflection, Lamar performs what he calls the Bowie knife test: he sticks his Bowie knife into the wall with all his strength with his right hand and then tries to withdraw it with his left. When he cannot remove it, he wonders, "[W]as my right arm strong or my left arm weak?" (59). Lamar's Bowie test is an attempt to find out just how much of his manhood, characterized here as strength, he still possesses, but what is intended to confirm his strength instead reveals his weakness. Lamar continues to reflect in this vein throughout an evening of self-discovery, introspection, cleansing, and, finally, confession. Only after bathing and shaving carefully – he intentionally revises his routine so as to put his finger on what has him so unsettled – can Lamar finally articulate the seed of his distress: "There was a secret wound which I had not been able to admit, even to myself. Now I could. It was that lately I had trouble making love to Margot. It was the last thing I expected. For the best thing we'd always had between us was a joyous and instant sex" (60). The way Lamar finally acknowledges this impotence, both to himself and Percival, reveals a huge chink in the armour of his exteriorized masculinity.

Initially, Lamar prefers to focus on the glory of his past athletic accomplishments and intellectual prowess, pointing out more than once how others validated these feats as exemplary of masculine achievement (10–11; 72–73; 197–98). And he tells Percival that his first wife, Lucy, was a virgin whom he romanticized rather than lusted for. But, as his opportunities for masculine accomplishment wane around the time he marries Margot, Lamar begins to place more and more value on sex as a primary way of performing his manhood. Indeed,

the best thing about their relationship, as he points out, was sex. His revelation that he is unable to perform sexually, then, is simultaneously an admission that he cannot perform his masculinity. As a result, the discovery of Margot's unfaithfulness drives Lamar to the shattering of his gender identity – what John Bugge calls the "central issue of the novel" (183) – and his violent annihilation of that which he rejects. But it is not the discovery of his wife's unfaithfulness alone that leads to violence; Lamar's dissatisfaction with the homosocial relationship engendered by the love triangle between himself, his wife, and his wife's lover also plays a crucial role.

Homosocial Performance and Triangulation

For Eve Sedgwick, author of *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, male homosociality is men desiring and promoting the interests of men (3), and Sedgwick's assertion that homosociality both refers to male bonding and yet remains on a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual draws on the structure of desire in male–male relationships. She argues that male homosocial desire (and this includes male homosexuality) works to maintain and transmit the power of patriarchy (25). This structure postulates men's use of homosociality as a way to admire and emulate each other's gendered performances of masculinity, and "triangulation" often occurs as a result; that is, in order to avoid being construed as homosexual, male homosociality relies on an object of desire for which rivals can compete, and this object is often (though not always) a woman (26). Sedgwick's theorization of male homosocial desire thus depicts men cementing their bonds with other men, in order to remain in a position of gendered power, by utilizing a female as an object of mutual action so as to demonstrate their masculine prowess to each other.

Todd Reeser, in *Masculinities in Theory*, argues that masculine rivalry "is not simply based on a desire to defeat or to vanquish the rival or to kill him off, but also implies a desire to emulate, to identify with, or to be like him" (57); the love triangle thus "serves a number of ends for masculinity: it avoids the homoerotic

threat and it keeps male domination in place" (62). The bond linking two rivals in a triangulated relationship, therefore, can be just as powerful as the bond linking two lovers. But not all triangulated relationships between men fortify masculine identity and power, as when, for example, a man's rival is not an acceptable object of desire or identification. Reeser argues that, when this happens, the nature of masculine anxiety and gendered identity's tenuous construction is revealed (64). Triangulation can take many different forms in literature as an expression of male homosociality, and its fluidity or ability to transform itself means it can be overlooked as a motivation for violence. I argue, however, that the transformation of homosocial triangulation often provokes aggression in men as a way of restoring compromised masculinity. Allen agrees, noting that behind themes of male bonding in American literature lies a cycle of dependence and aggression that results in violence (25). I add to this the assertion that violence, which may initially serve as a means of re-masculinization, ultimately highlights the failure of the dominant ideal of manhood and requires men to adjust their approach to establishing gender identity. We see this cycle clearly played out in Percy's novel: Lamar's violent acts fail to recuperate his threatened masculine identity, and he responds by radicalizing his views on manhood and violence even further.

Although Lamar cannot be called a reliable narrator – he vacillates between acknowledging a "sense of expectancy, a secret sweetness at the core of the dread" of discovering his wife's infidelity (34) and ranting about the unspeakability of the sexual offense (12) because sex is a "unique ecstasy" and "not a category" (17) – his tale of discovery is important regardless of whether or not his version of events is true, for it is the only account we are provided and it speaks significantly to his preoccupations with gender identity and a violent revisioning of the future. He repeats that the discovery is his moment of awakening, restoring to him his life and the freedom to act and to make whatever plans he wants to, and this moment provides purpose to Lamar in his new search for the "Unholy Grail" of his wife's sexual sin (124). But Lamar is also clear that,

though he knew what form his revenge would likely take, he waited to plan his retaliation until he was absolutely certain of her affair. Lamar initially assumes his wife is having an affair with Merlin, who he supposes is his daughter's actual father, but a subsequent dinner scene reveals Lamar's unexpectedly affectionate feelings towards Merlin, which are surprising given his recent discovery.

Not only does Lamar say of Merlin that "[h]e liked me and I him" (39), but he also acknowledges that the triangulated relationship instantiated by Margot's infidelity has served to bond the two men: "His blue gaze engaged me with a lively intimacy, establishing a bond between us and excluding the others. Somehow his offense against me was also an occasion of intimacy between us" (39–40). Recall Sedgwick's argument that triangulation can serve as a platform for two male rivals to desire *each other* rather than the woman purportedly between them, the female object functioning only as a mediator of their desire to identify with one another. Coulter accordingly points out that Merlin and Lamar, in their mutual attention, each feed the other's ego (104) and that Merlin serves as a mentor for Lamar, who, she argues, so identifies with Merlin that he eventually comes to "mirror" him (102; 106). This identification with Merlin has not gone unnoticed by other critics. Vauthier mentions how Lamar's hopes for the future and his pardoning of Merlin are rooted in an identification with him, as they are both at the losing end of their triangular relationship with Margot (95–96). Hebert similarly points out that, although Margot's betrayal hurts Lamar, it more importantly serves to strengthen the bond between the two men and thus "confirm[s] the existence of patriarchy, a structure to which Lance pledges his faith" (129). I believe too that Lamar's relationship with Merlin undergoes a transformation once he realizes that Merlin has cuckolded him: the sexual triangle becomes acceptable to Lamar, finally, because he likes Merlin and desires his rivalry.

Lamar is surprised, however, upon finally viewing Elgin's surveillance tapes, to see that the triangle he perceived to be occupied by himself, Merlin, and

Margot has been transformed: it is Janos Jacoby in Merlin's place as the lover and Merlin in Lamar's place as the cuckold. Of course, Lamar still has a place in this transformed triangle – he still, like Merlin (though on a parallel, congruent triangle), resides on a vertex opposite those occupied by Jacoby and Margot – but this configuration is unacceptable to him, and he begins to plan for Belle Isle's demise right away. It is also clear that the homosocial bond between Merlin and Lamar reveals a problem with Lamar's plans. His relief that Merlin has left Belle Isle hints at the inefficacy of violence to re-establish Lamar's gendered identity; it is a small unconscious acknowledgement on Lamar's part that destroying Merlin the cuckolder would also have destroyed Merlin the cuckold, suggesting that all masculine performance will inevitably be superseded by another's (superior) performance of masculinity. The only answer to this continually assured failure, in Lamar's mind, is a cycle of apocalypses that will never end, but, at the time of his decision to destroy his home and its occupants, Lamar does not consciously arrive at this realization, focused instead on purifying the love triangle through its destruction.

The reason a triangulated relationship with Jacoby results in Lamar's extreme use of violence is clear: Lamar looks down on him. He calls Jacoby "full of himself" and "youngish," noting that he seems constantly to be trying to either upstage Merlin or impress Margot, that his theories of cinematographic language are "junk," and that he cannot tell whether Merlin is bored by him or jealous of Margot's attentions (98–99). All these observations speak to Lamar's disdain towards Jacoby, an antipathy exacerbated by what Lamar perceives as his own invisibility: unlike Merlin, who notices Lamar and treats him with respect and affection, Jacoby seems to look past him. And Lamar, in response to feeling invisible, confesses, "[D]espite myself I wanted to be noticed by Janos Jacoby" (103). I argue that Jacoby's persistence in ignoring Lamar, his refusal to acknowledge the bond he creates between himself and Lamar over Margot, is what ultimately leads to his demise. This is because Lamar, newly awakened to his

failure to assert masculinity in any of the ways he values, is sensitive to other men's performances of masculinity (and their validation of his own), and Jacoby refuses to offer any form of affirmation. In response, Lamar clings to the bond he shares with Merlin and rejects Jacoby as a rival. While Margot's relationship with Merlin highlights both Lamar's failure to perform masculinity (in that he has been cuckolded) as well as his potential to live up to it (in that Lamar and Merlin affirm each other as men), Margot's relationship with Jacoby is a personal affront to Lamar's entire gendered identity. At one point in the novel, Lamar warns Margot that Jacoby might be exploiting her (157–59), and Merlin echoes this warning to Margot later on (172). The implication in these warnings is that Jacoby is not an honourable man, not someone whom either Merlin or Lamar perceive as a suitable rival for Margot's affections. As an unsatisfactory rival, Jacoby's refusal to validate the impotent Lamar creates a situation in which the only way for Lamar to prove his masculinity is to forcibly remove Jacoby from the equation. This is a crucial point: Lamar intends to kill them all, himself included, but the only person he will actually mutilate is Jacoby.

It could be argued that Lamar's murder of the actors Raine Robinette and Troy Dana contradicts my argument about triangulated homosocial relationships as a catalyst to male violence. After all, Margot was not sleeping with either of them. I argue, however, that a similar strand of fanatical thinking, intimately linked to the mutated chivalric code he applies to women, motivates him to kill the actors. Lamar's first mention of Troy and Raine features the pair absent-mindedly making fun of him, calling him "Rudy" (for his ruddy nose when he drinks, Lamar thinks) and humming "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" (44), and it is clear throughout the novel that Lamar similarly disdains both of them, depicting them as shallow ciphers. Later, despite having his own encounter with Raine that revives his sexual capacity, he disapproves of the actors' ménage à trois with his daughter Lucy. In the first instance, Troy and Raine pose a threat to Lamar's manhood, as few men find it acceptable to be mocked by people they look

down on. In the second, to a Lamar recently obsessed with sex – and particularly with sexual offenses such as adultery – their threesome with Lucy (to say nothing of his own sexual encounter with the pair) threatens his desire for sexual order.

Vauthier claims that "once Lance discovers that the marriage rules have been broken by Margot and her lovers, it is as if the link between violence and sex was suddenly both strengthened and made visible" (96). Although she is speaking specifically of Lamar's response to Margot and Jacoby, her claim can be extended to include his response to the Troy–Raine–Lucy triangle as well. As Vauthier goes on to point out, "[t]he narrator himself makes the association between his need to see and a purifying violence" (96), and Lamar sees with his own eyes the two actors engaging in sexual acts just as he had seen Margot and Jacoby. Indeed, the radicalization of his views on female sexuality begins to take shape with regards to Troy and Raine. Recall that Lamar's vision for the future is one in which "the secret of life is violence and rape" and "the omega point is sexual aggression" (208). Having been threatened and unmanned by Margot's sexual agency, Lamar's violent answer of sexual assault removes the threat of female sexual agency because it negates the possibility of female desire (threatening, as it is, to the patriarchal order). As a result, Raine's sexual agency in pursuing Lucy cannot be pardoned. Similarly, Troy's presence during Lamar's own encounter with Raine means that Lamar is once again triangulated as a sexual rival with someone he deems unsatisfactory, someone who can offer no validation of Lamar's masculinity.[5]

As noted earlier, Lamar's violent response to Margot's infidelity – that is, murdering Jacoby before blowing up Belle Isle – is intended to purify, restore, and, in a way, sanctify. He explains to Percival early on in his recounting of events that he has a sexual theory of history that applies to both humanity in general and to individuals in particular. He argues that there is, first, a romantic period and, second, a sexual period, followed by "a catastrophe of some sort. […] Most people

[5] Significantly, though Raine initiates the sexual encounter, it is only after Lamar notices Troy's presence and Lucy's ring on Raine's finger that he becomes sufficiently aroused to have sex and is ultimately able to finish.

will die or exist as the living dead. Everything will go back to the desert" (30). Since most will die in the catastrophe, Lamar plainly views violence as a means of clearing the way for a new future. In his aggression, too, Lamar expects a way of recovering the masculinity he has been unable to express. For example, while explaining to Percival that he "cannot tolerate this age," Lamar recalls his grandfather, who had been in a duel with a Bowie knife and won: "I could live that way, crude as it was[.] [...] [I]t is at least a way to live. One knows where one stands and what one can do. Even defeat is better than not knowing" (141). This need to know where one stands, so important to the recently awakened Lamar, leads him to attack Jacoby during the final few minutes before Belle Isle blows up. Lamar enters his wife's bedroom to find Jacoby and Margot engaged in coitus and, after fighting Jacoby, slits his throat. But he acknowledges a discrepancy between his expectations for this climactic moment and his failure to experience any sort of cathartic relief: "What I remember better than the cutting was the sense I had of casting about for an appropriate feeling to match the deed. Weren't we raised to believe that 'great deeds' were performed with great feelings [...]?" (227). Having expected that this act of murder would be a "great deed," a means of restoring and validating his masculine identity, Lamar instead feels immediately let down. There is no great feeling here to accompany his great deed; the violence he thought would restore the patriarchal order has been meaningless.

The New Masculinity: Revising the Chivalric Code

Although Lamar intends for his destruction of Belle Isle and its occupants to be restorative, he complains to Percival repeatedly that it has ultimately amounted to nothing: "Violence," he says, "is horrible not because it is bloody but because it is meaningless. It does not signify" (93). Near the end of his story, he confesses that, during the events at Belle Isle, which he anticipated would give him new life and restore his masculinity, he never felt anything but "a certain coldness" (236). Expecting to have reasserted his masculinity through great deeds, Lamar instead finds that his acts of violence failed to repair his shattered gender identity. Rather,

he has been institutionalized for a year following the events at Belle Isle, unwilling to speak at all.

Unfortunately, though Lamar now understands that his violence was meaningless, he fails to grasp that the reason his destructive acts have not been compensatory is because hegemonic masculinity can never be fully performed. Instead of attempting to navigate a new gender identity as a response to this failure, Lamar believes his actions have not gone far enough to revive the patriarchal code of chivalry. Percival's arrival, however, challenges Lamar to remember his story and inspires him to articulate his vision for the future – a new revolution, an apocalypse, a return to the Arthurian age of chivalry in which (as Lamar sees it, at least) men know how to be men and women are either proper ladies or whores. Through his rants, Lamar longs, as Hebert argues, "to re-reverse the gender roles and to empower men by refusing female desire a place in this world" (132). The return of Percival thus reawakens in Lamar the idea that violence can somehow restore this order. At the same time that Lamar admits that his destructive acts do not "signify," he works to establish a bond with his old friend: first, he recalls their early relationship, reminiscing about their successful performances of masculinity according to the dominant ideology; then, he identifies Anna, the gang-raped social worker in the next cell, as a potential object of his future desire. Hebert argues that Percival's presence empowers Lamar to pursue his vision of the future (137).[6] The problem, however, is that Lamar still wants to deploy violence in order to enact this vision and will thus be unable to convince Percival to join him. Indeed, in response to Lamar's tale of violence and his prophetic intolerance of what he calls the sexual age, Percival slowly begins to withdraw back into his role as priest. And, despite the excessively radical vision with which Lamar ends his confession – and, more importantly, despite the fact that Percival has heretofore remained silent – it is Percival who has the last word.

[6] Hebert's essay provides a fascinating exploration of the homosocial bond between Lamar and Percival, including Lamar's use of Anna to mediate his desires for Percival and how Percival's validation empowers Lamar in a world in which he fears women and resists emasculation.

Uttering a resounding "Yes" (239) to the question of whether he has anything to tell Lamar, Percival places himself in the position of validator. While Lamar surely filters for the reader many of Percival's objections about his future plans and his views on women, Percival in the end has more to say. His single response, "Yes," offers neither acceptance nor validation for Lamar; instead, the affirmation promises to invalidate Lamar's vision. Percival cannot forget about women; he cannot relegate them to the status of sexual objects whose "no" means literally "nothing," as Lamar does when he equates women's desire to "sheer negativity and want and lack" (71). Therefore, by answering "Yes," by affirming that he has something to tell Lamar, Percival does two crucial things. First, he vocalizes a defence of female desire, something Lamar wants to negate. Percival's concern for women and his objections to Lamar's characterization of women throughout the narration culminate in this single word. Whereas Lamar wishes to negate women and their sexual agency, Percival recuperates and affirms this agency when he responds in the affirmative. Second, Percival's "Yes" marks the start of his own narrative – and simultaneously completes his quest (as Bugge points out that, in some Grail stories, Percival fails the Grail Quest when he remains silent [184]) – which will certainly deny Lamar's vision of the future, as suggested by Percival's return to faith. It turns out, then, that the homosocial bond between the two men ultimately asserts the failure of violence to establish and reinforce masculine identity. The novel's conclusion makes clear that Lamar's recourse to violence as a means of reassembling his shattered masculinity has ultimately proved ineffective, and he must resign himself to this understanding through his failure to secure Percival's validation.

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