

**Maleness/Femaleness – The ‘Pharmatic’ Status of Paul Howard,
a.k.a Ross O’Carroll-Kelly’s Work**

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It can be argued that the binary opposition maleness/femaleness read against the texts of Paul Howard, a.k.a Ross O’Carroll-Kelly, constructs the female as ‘other’; as somewhat deviant to the concept of maleness, which serves as the transcendental signifier. This paper is driven by the hierarchical opposition, maleness/femaleness, and how, by the concept of patriarchy, the opposition is hierarchically valorised. Simone de Beauvoir articulates this idea in *The Second Sex*, when she speaks of women as ‘other’, noting that when a woman ‘tries to define herself, she starts by saying, “I am a woman”: no man would do so’, and this displays the basic ‘asymmetry between the terms “masculine” and “feminine”’: man define the human, not woman’ (de Beauvoir 1949, xxxi). The cultural privileging of the male over the female, of the rational over the emotional, of the serious over the frivolous, the reflective over the spontaneous, essentially the self over the other, will be examined here through the texts of Howard. Indeed, it is the character of Ross, Howard’s main protagonist, and his casual misogyny snobbery, elitism and all round obnoxiousness towards women, which embodies what feminists believe to be the basic structure of culture – women being subject to an androcentric worldview. Howard’s text when read through the lens of this opposition articulates the notion of phallogentrism – the idea of ‘male firstness’ (Derrida 1982, 445). This paper will argue that within the texts of Howard there is a phallogentric construction of woman as ‘other’ and by introducing Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘undecidability’, the idea of otherness can

be dismantled, essentially blurring the boundaries between the binary opposition maleness/femaleness, so that the boundary that constructs a sense of otherness becomes fluid and ambiguous. Therefore, Derrida's undecidables overturn the classical opposition and release antiphallocentric effects. Indeed, this opposition can be undone not to the point where femaleness takes precedence over maleness but to a moment where doubt is imposed and seemingly different elements bleed into one another and begin to alter the discursive field in which they are situated. The other infects the self and contrariwise. This dismantling of femaleness – the other, when read through this deconstructive lens is an aporia, a pathless path, a type of writing which dismantles the maleness/femaleness dichotomy. Essentially, this paper shall follow the exploits of Ross and see the text coming 'undone as a structure of concealment, revealing its self-transgression, its undecidability' (Derrida 1976, 1xxv) of the maleness/femaleness, self/other opposition.

Derrida believes, that Western philosophy orders language within a binary logic, in which one half of the binary is always privileged over the other, maleness over femaleness, self over the other. I aim to elucidate Derrida's deconstructive strategy of how binaries can be dismantled to the point of an undecidable – a double logic of 'neither/or' and 'both this and that' structure (Derrida 1988, 232). This phallogocentric favouring of male over female operates, in Derrida's view, according to the same logic as that of logocentrism and phonocentrism. Therefore, Derrida's dismantling of the history of Western discourse will be used as a means of displaying the notion of an undecidable within Howard's work. Just as Derrida shatters the idea of writing denoting otherness, I will use his thinking to dismantle the idea of women signifying otherness within Howard's text. Thus, a brief delineation of Derrida's most notable undecidable the 'pharmakon' is necessary in order that Howard's 'pharmakic' status may be comprehended. Derrida locates his argument within the Platonic text of

Phaedrus. He takes the binary, speech/writing and dismantles the text by focusing on the word ‘pharmakon’. The ‘pharmakon’ means ‘remedy’ as well as ‘poison’, the word is irreducible to an either/or logic, shattering the phonocentric bias that Western philosophers held.

Derrida through his reading of Plato illustrates how this onto-theological assumption can be undone to the point of an undecidable. Derrida subverts Plato’s privileging of speech over writing, by showing how this reversal is already at play in Plato’s text, *Phaedrus*. This is a fictional conversation between two historical characters, Socrates and Phaedrus, in which Socrates uses the myth of Thoth to convince Phaedrus of the importance of speech over writing. Thoth who invented writing offers it as a gift to King Thamus. Thoth refers to the gift as a ‘pharmakon’, and the king refuses it on the grounds that it will aid forgetfulness. For as Barbra Johnson explains:

Socrates’ condemnation of writing and his panegyric to direct speech as the proper vehicle for dialectics and Truth have for centuries been taken almost exclusively at face value (Johnson 1981, xxiv).

Derrida subverts this privileging of speech over writing through a single word: the word ‘pharmakon’, which in Greek means ‘poison, medicine, magic potion’ (Derrida 1976, 1xxi), in his essay ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, contained within Derrida’s seminal work *Dissemination*. Derrida proves that writing is merely a constructed other, and is just as significant as speech. The workings of the ‘pharmakon’ can be seen when Thamus states to Thoth that he has not ‘discovered a potion for remembering’ (Plato 2001, 82), and it is this word ‘potion’ which Derrida uses to dismantle writing as occupying the position of other. A ‘potion’ can be defined as a beneficial or harmful drug; it acts both as a remedy and as a poison, thus introducing the concept of ambivalence. Therefore, Derrida observes the problematic aspects of the translation

of the 'pharmakon', as it signifies two opposite meanings – it translates as both cure and poison. The paradoxical meaning of the word 'pharmakon' is the concept which, according to Derrida, orders binary oppositions and thus renders them unstable. For as Derrida insists:

Hence, for example, the word *pharmakon*. In this way we hope to display in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has [...] permitted the rendering of the same word by "remedy", "recipe", "poison", "drug", "philter", etc. It will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable [...] by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation. With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy (Derrida 1981b, 71-2).

Derrida's reading shows how language is far from binary in its logic, unless all ambiguities and play in the linguistic system are severely attenuated. The poison inhabits the cure and vice versa, each term in each opposition is inhabited by its opposite resulting in an undecidability of meaning, which Derrida defines as:

unities of simulacrum, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialects (Derrida 1981a, 43).

This paper is driven by Derrida's notion that an undecidable lies at the heart of interpretation as it dismantles the concept of woman as other. Howard's works, it can be argued, formulates the law of undecidability. This thinking ruptures the belief in the otherness of the written word and deconstructs an assurance in the self/other structure, as oppositions are now answerable to a blurred boundary, where one half of the binary seems to bleed into the other. The undecidable can be read as a way of explaining the structural contradiction that dwells at the core of language, and which

causes the impossibility of articulating certainty; it is something which has a destabilizing effect on the notion of truth as claimed by philosophers and metaphysical thinkers. When deconstructed, oppositions ‘lean on and support each other (*s'étaient*)’, ‘they are indissociable’ (Derrida 1982, 471).

Howard’s works brings to light a sardonic depiction of the wealthy, self-obsessed classes who prided themselves in living in South Dublin – ‘a land of untold beauty and wealth, which boasts more yacht clubs per head of population than Monte Carlo, where girls talk like Californians, where rugby is the number one religion and where it’s possible to buy a Cappuccino – at Champs-Elyse’s prices’ (Howard 2008, 284). Consequently, Dublin 4 is a place where ‘males address one another by their surnames, where a sense of community is non-existent – and where the sun never stops shining...’ (Howard 2008, 11). Ross mirrors a cultural trend which values appearance and financial assets; in *Rhino What You Did Last Summer*, Ross underwent a surgical procedure, rhinoplasty, or as he puts it: a ‘nose job’ (Howard 2009, 223), to make his nose smaller, and subsequently ends up getting ‘the focking lot – the lipo, the abdominal resculpt, the pectoral implants, the new calves and the rhinoplast’ (Howard 2009, 223). Ross describes the pain he endured: ‘and we’re talking total agony’, however he realizes that he will be as ‘pretty as a focking girl’ (Howard 2009, 223). Howard’s writing mirrors major social themes of this era through his device of capturing the speech pattern of Ross and his social peers. It is his language which holds the key to unlocking the cultural context, and allowing the reader to gain access to the cultural and linguistic mores of Dublin 4 and of the people who live there: they are plastic people with plastic features.

It is the character of Ross which can be argued to locate a construction of woman as other, as the deviant within the male/female opposition. He states, ‘a bird

walks by in literally just a bikini – a ringer for Hayden Panettierre. She has a good look – gagging for me’ (Howard 2009, 37). This male vocal domain is paradigmatic of patriarchal society, which highlights men as naturally dominating women. Ross refers to women in terms of who they resemble from the world of film, media and the celebrity circuit. For example, Ross exclaims, ‘she looks a bit like America Ferrera in *real life*’ (Howard 2009, 326), at the beginning of *Rhino What You Did Last Summer*, he exclaims ‘but here I am, in an unbelievable apartment on La Cienega Boulevard, wedged between Sahara, who wants me bad, and Corey, who’s a banger for Odette Yustman, while Nia, - if I had to compare her to someone, I’d have say Holly Madison ...’ (Howard 2009, 40). This male chauvinism can be further exemplified through the lines, ‘fock, she looks like Samia Ghadie’ (Howard 2007, 80), ‘she’s actually a ringer for Adele Silva’ (Howard 2007, 23) or ‘this bird – who I’m not exaggerating – is the spitting image of Amanda Brunner. It’s like, HELLO? How can you not be sisters?’ (Howard 2006, 85). One could list hundreds of examples from all the books as this is a paradigmatic trope in Ross’s vocabulary of desire: for a woman to be attractive to him, the reader must compare her to some unobtainable, beautiful woman who she resembles, so that Ross will become the object of envy for being able to attract such a desirable woman.

Similarly Ross illustrates how men objectify women by describing Chloe’s breast augmentation in the following terms:

Jesus Christ! I think those two words actually come out of my mouth. I’m not the only one either. Where the fock did she get those? Every focker knows that Chloe’s flatter than a carpenter’s dream – or even was. I’ve never seen a rack like it. We’re talking focking huge. They’re so big they should have traffic cones and a focking guardrail around them (Howard 2007, 56).

Clearly, this reinforces the feminist argument that women are controlled by a male perspective and a male gaze and are reduced to a sexual object, essentially an ‘other’.

It is Ross who insists that, 'I'm sitting back, watching the sights. In the next lane, this – if I'm being honest – Alessandra Ambrosio lookalike in a Mercedes SLK Luxury Roadster' (Howard 2009, 48). Society focuses on women's appearance, thus attenuating any other form of value or worth that women may have to offer. Ross often comments 'she looks well' or on 'the beauty' (Howard 2009, 52), when he is commenting on women. They are controlled by the male gaze or scopis drive, where woman is valued only inasmuch as she is valued by male desire. Similarly, Ross constructs an image of Sorcha for the reader, he states, 'she has un-fucking-believable Jakki Deggs, in fairness to her, smooth and tanned, and the way she's dangling her Havaiana on the end of her foot is doing it for me in a big-time way' (Howard 2009, 20). In addition, Ross further demonstrates how the concept of women is constructed by the male lens, when he says that he was 'basically chilling, watching the birds go by, we're talking serious hotties here, and I see this bird coming from, like, fifty yards, away and – not being racist here, roysh – but she's black. I swear to God she is so like Jamelia, roysh, you would swear it was her' (Howard 2006, 129). Also Ross presents a very negative image of Sorcha's grandmother because she is old and therefore unattractive to him: 'she looks a state. Big grey coat on her. Roy Cropper shopping bag. Big fucking tea cosy on her head. I don't even know how she got in here' (Howard 2006, 210). This exemplifies that it is the male optical lens of Ross that mediates an image of the female aesthetic, thus reinforcing patriarchal ideology; it is Ross who constructs a comparative framework in order to value, or rank, women who hold the position of other.

Ross can also be seen as sexist and ill-mannered to the feelings of others, and his language further portrays women as devalued entities by constantly equating them with pet names. Ross brands women as 'babes' (Howard 2007, 163), 'hotties' (Howard 2006, 129), 'sugarbabes' (Howard 2009, 344) and 'honeys' (Howard 2006,

188). This signals that women require a phallic stamp, and this ‘branding determines their value in sexual commerce’ (Atkins and Morrow 1989, 188). Therefore one can argue that in the contemporary world of Ross, a women’s importance is scaled between the opposition of ‘either too pretty or too ugly’ (Woolf 1990, 69), they are lodged between the extremities of ‘positive and negative’ (Woolf 1990, 70). For instance, Ross distinguishes between women on the grounds that they are ‘dressed like the queue for the 77 bus’ (Howard 2010, 344) or that other women are ‘pretty cute,’ and dressed in the likes of ‘white-chocolate Clearcoat Lincoln Navigator’ (Howard 2010, 352).

Another example is in *The Oh My God Delusion*, where he is speaking about ‘lady cops,’ and insists that ‘the only reason I haven’t gone into any detail about her, by the way, is because she’s one of the ugliest life forms I’ve ever set eyes on. I wouldn’t touch her with asbestos fucking gloves’ (Howard 2010, 359). Or he even refers to a girl called Suzette in *Rhino What You Did Last Summer* as being ‘not the best looking wise’ (Howard 2009, 127). Ross insists, ‘now, I’ve had my share of beautiful women over the years’ (Howard 2009, 127), and his motto has always been, ‘choose em, use’em and lose’em’ (Howard 2010, 126). This reveals the male dominated public social sphere where there has been an attenuation of the female subject into the beautiful and the ugly; the attractive and the unattractive. These are the only criteria of value as far as he is concerned: ‘Erika looks incredible and I’m only mentioning that as a statement of fact’ (Howard 2010, 144). Women, for Ross, have continued to be signified by a system of sex-role stereotyping, they are associated with how they present themselves or natural beauty, thus these labels equate to what Marchbank and Letherby call the ‘beauty myth’ – ‘white-skinned, blue-eyed, straight-haired ideal’ (Marchbank and Letherby 2007, 309).

It was Naomi Woolf who explored this notion of ‘the beauty myth’ and how it transgressed from the introduction of women’s magazines. Woolf declared that, ‘women’s magazines accompanied women’s advances and the simultaneous evolution of the beauty myth’ (Woolf 1990, 62). She felt that:

the rise in women’s magazines was brought about by large investments of capital combined with increased literacy and purchasing power of lower-middle and working-class women: the democratization of beauty had begun. (Woolf 1990, 62)

Women have been ideologically interpellated into thinking that a ‘heroine’ must ‘keep on being beautiful’ (Woolf 1990, 66), thus ‘we tuck flowers and ribbons in our hair and try to keep our faces looking pretty as you please’ (Woolf 1990, 63). This ideology has been internalized by women and compels them to serve as aspiring beauties, hence ‘in diet, skin care, and surgery features, it sells women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy’ (Woolf 1990, 69). This denotes ambiguity within Howard’s text and it is a Derridean ‘*brisure* or folding-joint’ (Derrida 1976, 65-66) which, through this ‘double gesture, a double science, a double writing’ practices an ‘*overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system’ (Derrida 1982, 329). Woolf argues that magazines like *Vogue* ‘focus on the body as much as on the clothes’, and also that ‘the number of diet-related articles rose 70 per cent from 1972 to 1986, while articles on dieting in the popular press soared from 60 in the year 1979 to 66 in the month of January 1980 alone’ (Woolf 1990, 67). Sorcha reveals how she reads the likes of ‘The Oprah Magazine’ (Howard 2009, 189), or Ross describes how ‘Erika goes on flicking through her magazine. Sorcha says there’s, like, an amazing Hale Bob dress in there – “the next page, on the page after” – and that she loves busy prints because you can wear them with, like, minimal accessories’ (Howard 2009, 308). It is Woolf who

summarises the effects of reading magazines, suggesting that they give women a 'weird mixture of anticipation and dread, a sort of stirred-up euphoria' (Woolf 1990, 62).

Howard touches on the dangers of the 'beauty myth' through Aoife, Sorcha's friend, experiencing a crisis of identity; she suffered from an eating disorder, which leads to her subsequent death. As Ross recounts, Aoife was 'more in love with the idea of playing golf than the game itself – especially the four or five hours of walking involved in a round, which she thought about in terms of calories rather than putts' (Howard 2007, 311). The political implication is 'that no women or group of women, whether housewives, prostitutes, astronauts, politicians or feminists, can survive unscathed the no-win scrutiny of the beauty myth' (Woolf 1990, 69). This articulates antiphallocentric effects renouncing a blurred boundary where the notion of otherness is immersed within the self. For example, a banner at the 1969 Miss America pageant read, 'there's only one thing wrong with Miss America – she's beautiful and jealousy will get you nowhere' (Woolf 1990, 68). In addition, Woolf insists that feminists have often been referenced as, 'a bunch of ugly women screaming at each other on television' (Woolf 1990, 68).

Such is the power of the beauty myth and the male gaze that women are often complicit in attempting to make themselves as attractive as they can to that male gaze, to the exclusion of all other values and attributes. Ross voices his shock when Sorcha intends to put Honor into a pair of Stilettos, he states, 'I was convinced that Sorcha was shitting me when I saw them first. Stilettos for babies. I asked her was it not, like, dangerous, but she said that girls eventually have to learn to wear designer heels and it's best that they stort young' (Howard 2009, 17). It is Ross who indicates the dangerous consequences of this by revealing that 'I could have pointed out that Chloe back home has been told that she has to have both hips replaced, the result of a

lifetime wearing designer heels' (Howard 2009, 17). This shows that 'the system contains the materials for its own subversion' (Leitch 2001, 193), as through the idea of the 'beauty myth' males like Ross are not solely responsible for devaluing the female entity by equating their worth with the labelled clothes they wear and with their appearance. Females within Howard's fiction also view themselves within the beauty/ugly duality; they too are obsessed with their appearance and view their worth in conjunction with the labelled clothes they are wearing. This echoes Derrida's thinking that he is 'not dismantling the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself' (Leitch 2001, 193-194), because although the story is told through the eyes of Ross, the first person narrator, the women when they do speak demonstrate a reality whereby they are fixated with their appearance, as they discuss dieting and constant comparisons of themselves with stars of film, TV, music and magazines. This formulates the law of an undecidable, as Howard's language is underpinned by the logic of the pharmakon, it is 'both poison and cure and neither poison and cure' (Powell 1997, 85).

For example, Ross outlines the sole reason for Sorcha's call is to tell him that 'lace is the sexiest fabric this year with Prada, Vuitton and Stella' (Howard 2009, 85). Another example is where Sorcha runs a fashion show in Aid of the 'Jolie-Pitt Foundations, which is one of the most – Oh My God – amazing charities' (Howard 2009, 188), however throughout the show there is a constant comparison with stars of TV, for instance, 'Elodine totally pulls it off with this Touch Luxe silver scales jacket, Louboutin heels and – can we see the pin, Elodine? – a Lucite flower pin by Alexis, as seen in *Sex and the City*' (Howard 2009, 189). Therefore the women in the series internalise the beauty myth, and the celebrity myth, which though an initial reading objectifies women establishing them as the other within the self/other binary. The female subject compares themselves with famous women, just as Ross does,

through their focus on their bodily appearance, and through their ascription of value almost solely within this paradigm. This raises the question as to whether men are exclusively responsible for the objectification of women or are they merely commenting on social codes as embodied by women. It is no longer maleness that dominates femaleness. It was Lee Bartky, when discussing the male gaze, who insists that ‘a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women, women learn to appraise themselves through male eyes within a patriarchal culture’ (Bartky 2005, 468). This illustrates a blurring of maleness/femaleness, as men too live within the confines of beauty bondage. It would be inconceivable for Ross to be seen with a woman who was not some reflection of a well-defined beautiful woman in the media. He can only find women attractive who have been socially-designated as attractive by the cultural media. This is why Fionnuala’s espousal of her own middle-aged sexuality is so repulsive to him, as in the magazines and programmes which arbitrate such matters; it is only younger women who are deemed to be attractive in this discourse.

In this context, it is useful to examine the case of Sorcha, when she insists on taking Ross for a day out. His idea of a day together is ‘wrapping his face’ around a plate of wings and ‘a couple of JDs’ (Howard 2009, 51). However, Sorcha’s plan is a trip to ‘Kitson, the boutique on Robertson Boulevard where she’s already got – oh my God – so many ideas for her own shop’ (Howard 2009, 51). Sorcha insists, ‘Robertson is the place to be’, that’s why they’re all here, Ross – Kitson, Curve, Lisa Kline. Because they know all the celebrities hang out here. Having Katie or Halle or Reese photographed walking into your shop in, like, a supermarket tabloid is better than a two-page ad in *Vogue*. I read that in the *LA Times*’ (Howard 2009, 52). This demonstrates what Derrida termed a ‘subversion of logocentric metaphysics’ and what appears are ‘new notions of interpretations’ (Leitch 2001, 194), where it is not

men alone who degrade the female entity by comparing them with the ‘beauty myth’, but women who also ascribe to similar self-assessments. Women’s economy is one of labels fuelling the need to keep their ‘Feminine Quotient’ high (Woolf 1990, 63). Another example is where Sorcha receives an instant text about the stars and the clothes they are wearing: it is reported that ‘Halle Berry wore a satin Monique Lhuillier dress with peacock feathers along with Terry de Havilland strappy sandals and glittery Chopard diamonds to some movie premier’ (Howard 2009, 51). Importantly, Sorcha repeats ‘every word of this carefully, like she’s memorizing it, then she nods, like she approves’ (Howard 2009, 51). This suggests that ideologically Sorcha has been interpellated into the beauty myth, which would seem to suggest that this text is just replicating the culture of patriarchy; however, in a double writing, it is also suggesting that men have become equally captivated by the beauty myth. In the Dublin 4 world, similar identity assessments apply to both males and females as they both judge each gender and the other gender in terms of physical appearance and designer clothes.

Another example of the internalization of the ‘beauty myth’ can be seen in terms of the metonymic value of shoes. On hearing that Chloe has to get two hip replacements, due to years of wearing designer shoes by ‘Manolo Blahnik’ and ‘Jimmy Choo’ (Howard 2010, 41), Sorcha bursts into tears exclaiming, ‘what if Chloe can never wear amazing shoes again’ (Howard 2010, 45). This implies that Chloe’s self-worth will be diminished if she can never wear designer labelled shoes after the operation. Sorcha seems to have little concern over the debilitating effects of two hip operations at such a young age. It is Ross who displays logical reason by insisting that it’s all ‘very Izzie focking Stevens’, referring to a character from the television series *Grey’s Anatomy*, and he puts his arm around Sorcha insisting ‘that won’t happen’ (Howard 2010, 45). This echoes Virginia Woolf, and her notion of the

‘looking-glass’ where women themselves collude in their own victimisation by acting as mirrors and reflecting back to men their desired image. In *Rhino What You Did Last Summer*, it is described how women have combined both athletic ability and beauty, by hosting ‘the California High-Heel-A-Thon’, indeed, ‘in lane one, wearing a stunning pair of Kurt Geiger snake-skin platform courts, *from* the TV show *The Biggest Loser*, ladies and gentlemen, Alison Sweeney.....’ (Howard 2009, 318). This underlines that the assumption of woman as ‘other’ is further internalised by women themselves. For Woolf writes:

A woman cannot find in them that fountain of perpetual life which the critics assure her is there. It is not only that they celebrate male virtues, enforce male value and describe the world of men (Woolf 1929, 1028).

This illustrates the point that males and females are not so distinctly different, ‘there is a play of spacing by which the elements relate to each other’ (Atkins and Marrow 1989, 141), and in this case, that relation is to the ‘beauty myth’, and later, Ross’s own obsession with beauty will be outlined.

A further illustration of how the male/female opposition is subject to the concept of an undecidable is to be found within the character of Sorcha herself. In the prologue to *This Champagne Mojito is the Last Thing I Own*, Sorcha has embraced the public working-world, conventionally a male dominated sphere, to become, ‘owner and manager of Sorcha’s Fashions in Dublin’s Powerscourt Townhouse Center, one of the hottest boutiques in the city right now, with exclusive Chloé and LoveKylie ranges’ (Howard 2007, 3). This echoes a point made by Virginia Woolf where domestic life, the interior space, is a female one and Woolf celebrates any female who chooses to leave this private sphere. Ross recounts how ‘we’re having Sunday lunch in LePanto, roysh, in the Radisson in Booterstown, and what we’re celebrating is the fact that, from tomorrow, Sorcha’s shop is going to be the first in

Ireland to sell Rock & Republic jeans' (Howard 2007, 73). It is also suggested that Sorcha has a 'great business brain' (Howard 2007, 74), as she says how the jeans cost 'four hundred and fifty euro a pair and I cannot believe the demand for them already. We've got, like, twenty pairs of VB Rocks arriving in tomorrow and orders for, like forty-five. It's like, *oh my God*' (Howard 2007, 74). Sorcha demonstrates a rejection of the traditional confinement of women to the private sphere by choosing to return to work soon after Honor was born and hiring a nanny. This is to the disbelief of her parents, who insist that 'stay-at-home mums form a bond with their children that working mum's don't' (Howard 2007, 74). Sorcha situates herself as an independent, self-regulating woman who does not view herself as marginalised or dominated by men. Indeed, she reminds Ross that 'I got maximum points in my Leaving Cert., you got minimum. Has something happened in the meantime to persuade you that you're smarter than me' (Howard 2007, 101). Although Sorcha's boutique does not survive the recession, she still destabilizes the binary by illustrating the self-determination of setting up the boutique. Sorcha has altered the social order which according to the traditional wave of feminists programmes women to be dominated by men.

The character of Ross can also be used to show a destabilizing of the patriarchal ideology from a male perspective. Ross 'lived a life of insulated splendour revolving around a series of parties and minor social disasters' (irishindependent.com). An example of his unerring ability to bring disaster to a normal event is when he decided to add 'Vodka, Southern Comfort...' to the punch bowl at a children's party; his excuse is that 'I just wanted to liven things up a bit in here. Jesus, I've been at fucking autopsies with a better atmos' (Howard 2010, 89). In a manner reminiscent of Boyle, Ross is a vain man; he insists 'I'm trying to be objective here, but I'm quite honestly one of the best-looking men I've ever seen, although, really, I'd have to leave that for others to say' (Howard 2007, 328). Ross

concerns himself with his appearance, a stereotype commonly associated with being feminine. He states, ‘those who said that I couldn’t get any better-looking have been proven well and truly wrong and naturally I’m thinking, maybe I’ll give the old tantric a miss tonight, hit Les Deux instead, or maybe even Goa – have me some non-committal fun’ (Howard 2009, 328). Ross demonstrates how binary gender categories are fluid, as he is obsessed with his appearance and estimates both his self-worth and an individual’s worth by the labels attached to their clothing. For instance he states at the beginning of *The Oh My God Delusion*, that after one of his ‘better one-night stands, it has to be said’ (Howard 2010, 1) how he throws ‘on the old Apple Crumble, step into my chinos and my Cole Hanns, then fix my hair in the mirror’ (Howard 2010, 1).

His grasp of fashion is a trait that has been traditionally associated with women. When speaking of Erika, he describes how ‘she’s wearing the sky-blue Abaeté dress that Sorcha lent her with, like XOXO flats and Jill Jacobson floral cuffs’ (Howard 2009, 247). Ross overturns the gender difference by ascribing to the ‘beauty myth’, an ideology with which girls and women have long been associated (Marchbank and Letherby 2007, 309). This deconstructs the terms of the traditional binary opposition where men have been associated with ‘reason, objectivity and logic’ as opposed to women who have been adjoined with ‘body matter and emotions’ (Ryan 1999, 102). Essentially, this is the mind/body dualism, and Ross demonstrates that the oppositions are essentially fluid and ambiguous. Women are generally seen to be ‘concerned about how they present themselves, anxious about whether they match up to the beauty myth’ (Marchbank and Letherby 2007, 309), but in this book, it is Ross who displays this trait. He even goes as far as to get cosmetic surgery, noting, after getting his rhinoplasty, that ‘it’s possibly the most perfect nose I’ve ever seen. It makes me look a good twenty per cent better-looking, if you can

believe that's even possible' (Howard 2009, 328). He insists that he cannot stop 'checking it out' or 'touching it either' (Howard 2009, 328). Interestingly, cosmetic surgery has been viewed as a 'gendered practice', as 'surgeons are almost exclusively male and patients largely female' (Marchbank and Letherby 2007, 309). In this case, it is the male character who invests in the world of plastic surgery; he describes the procedure as, 'the last thing I hear is Harvey go, "Oh! My! God!" and Trevion go "Goodnight, Joycie!" I'm like, "Just don't make me look like..." and I'm out of the game before I can even say La Toya Jackson' (Howard 2009, 223).

Howard further demonstrates a breaking down of the gender structure by demonstrating how emotional Ross can be, especially in *Should Have Got Off at Sydney Parade*, a book which sees an emotional, moving and often expressive Ross, who is in touch with his feelings, despite himself. He describes how 'I'm crying. I'm there, look at me! Crying like a fucking bird! Seriously, I'm pretty much on the verge of tears all the time and I don't even know why' (Howard 2006, 102). Ross displays a heightened sensitivity towards his emotions, as he exhibits symptoms associated with a 'sympathetic pregnancy' (Howard 2006, 82), a phenomenon explained by Ross as 'chucking up my guts for no reason and, like, bursting into tears at the slightest thing' (Howard 2006, 82). The symptoms extend as far as Ross experiencing 'bad cramps in my legs and lower back' (Howard 2006, 82). He even expresses how he feels left out of Sorcha's pregnancy, as Claire 'as in Claire from, like Brayruit, of all places', was asked by Sorcha 'to be her, like, birth partner' (Howard 2006, 13). Indeed when the women are discussing the birth plan, Ross describes how:

Claire all of a sudden gets up, roysh, and goes, "you can't be comfortable sitting in that hard chair like that. Sorcha," and she grabs a cushion off the sofa, roysh, and puts it behind Sorcha's back and goes, "for support..." and I'm left standing there, thinking, hey that's my job (Howard 2006, 88).

Ross even insists, 'it's like I'm not even there' (Howard 2006, 88), therefore what is presented to the reader is a sensitive Ross who is in touch with his emotions. He is unable to verbalise these, except to Marty, and it is his body which signifies his feelings, through vomiting and food cravings.

Just as Derrida insists opposition 'neither belongs to the insider nor to the outside' (Derrida 1976, 25), the same applies to the portrayal of Ross's story; it cannot be locked within maleness/femaleness, a self/other dichotomy. Demonstrating that binary logic does not adhere to the notion of purity; there is a sense of openness attached to the opposition. The male/female opposition is subject to an either/or logic. The writings of Howard deconstructs this either/or logic by creating characters who embody properties that seem to be those of the other side of the binary opposition. Ross displays elements of passivity, vanity and emotion which some of the female characters embody the more stereotypical elements of dominance. They embody the notion of what Derrida has called the undecidable.

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