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**LOUISE-FANNY-REBECCA: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF  
THE FEMININE VOICE IN *A MAGGOT* (1985) BY JOHN FOWLES**

**Abstract**

In Fowles' intricate historiographic metafiction, *A Maggot* (1985), the presentation of the English society of the 1730s in which the Shakers lived revolves not solely around Bartholomew, the enigmatic aristocratic hero, and Ayscough, the lawyer-interrogator<sup>1</sup> whose main task is to discover the reasons behind Bartholomew's secret journey, his mysterious disappearance and the uncanny death of his male servant, but most particularly around the female protagonist, firstly introduced as Louise (the maid), then as Fanny (the prostitute), and finally as Rebecca (the born-again dissenter), who in the end is revealed to be the fictional mother of Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers' Movement of Dissent.

In this paper it is my main purpose to concentrate on the figure of Fowles' existential heroine, following her personal evolution from a «fallen woman» to a powerful religious dissenter, and examine her feminine, liberating discourse in opposition to Ayscough's, representative of the male-dominant world of eighteenth-century England.

As its famous predecessor, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Fowles' latest and, in my view, most intricate historiographic metafiction, *A Maggot*, originated as a specific visual image. In the prologue, the author states that the novel was written:

out of obsession with a theme. For some years before its writing a small group of travellers, faceless, without apparent motive, went in my mind towards an event. Evidently in some past, since they rode horses, and in a deserted landscape; but beyond this very primitive image, nothing ... The riders never progressed to any destination. They simply rode along a skyline<sup>1</sup>.

It is precisely such an image of a small group of travellers journeying through a bleak landscape in south-west England which introduces *A Maggot's* opening section (*M*, 7-13), the first of seven sections that form the most extensive narrative passage of the novel<sup>2</sup>. Midst the five mysterious travellers - four men (a

gentleman in his twenties, Mr Bartholomew; another past middle-age, Mr Brown; a young manservant, Dick; a bodyguard, Sergeant Farthing), and a young woman (their pretty maid Louise), the reader encounters the heroes of Fowles' narrative.

The initial narrative passage (*M*, 7-58) presents through extra-heterodiegetic narration the travellers' progress through the bleak landscape, their arrival at «the small town of C\_\_», and their night at the Black Hart Inn. But more disturbingly, what the reader gradually comes to understand is that what he/she has been led to believe is quite false. Hence, all the characters but one, the deaf-mute servant, are not what they seem to be: Mr Bartholomew (a duke's heir) plays the role of nephew to Mr Brown, who turns out to be a known actor (named Lacy) hired to play the part of the uncle. Sergeant Farthing, another minor actor called Jones, plays the role of guard to protect the travellers from possible thieves and the lovely maid Louise is a London prostitute, known as Fanny, hired to attend Bartholomew's sexual needs; she will later reappear under her true name, Rebecca.

Also, regarding Bartholomew's journey and its secret purpose, not one but several conflicting stories are put forth. Was the purpose of the journey for Bartholomew to carry out an elopement with the woman he loves (section 3), to pay court to a wealthy maiden aunt to secure his inheritance (section 5), or to a Devon water-cure for his sexual impotence (section 7)? A fourth version presents Bartholomew as «obsessed with esoteric knowledge... Mr. B. would be traveling to the mythic circle of Stonehenge in order to recover through obscure calculation the long-lost power of the ancients to communicate with external beings, whether fiendish, celestial, or simply extraterrestrial» (Onega, 1989: 149). Having reached at this stage page 58 out of the 460 pages of the novel, what the reader is next confronted with is in no way a more or less traditional unfolding of events towards the journey's destination.

At this point, let us return to Fowles' prologue and consider the following: «A maggot is the larval stage of a winged creature». Apart from this modern, current meaning we are likewise informed that «an older though now obsolete sense of the word is that of whim or quirk» (*M*, 5), a fantasy or obsession. «This fictional maggot» is in direct link with a woman Fowles says to have long admired and whose birth closes, in a way, his narrative. Without mentioning her name, he stresses that «this fiction is in no way biographically about that... woman, though it does end with her birth», that he gives «that child her historical name; but... *would not have this seen as a historical novel. It is maggot*» (*M*, 5-6) [italics mine].

In fact, what Fowles offers in this complex historiographic metafiction is a whimsical world, a fantasy (as the archaic sense of the word «maggot» indicates) about the Shakers and the society in which they lived through the extra-heterodiegetic voice of his twentieth-century, well-informed, and often

anachronistic narrative of the cultural, religious, and political life of nineteenth-century England. A historical name of the novel is the birth of the four protagonists. Appearing, better known about the historical novel, Rebecca, the prostitute, is an existential heroine.

Going back now to the less conventional narrative conclusion but the title page of the «Historical Magazine», an eighteenth-century insertion of this novel transformed in a half-century will be of a very different structure, will from over by a new character the duke, Bartholomew the disappearance simultaneously discovered (Lacy), Sergeant Farthing proceeds therefore with «Examinations and E» «Q» and «A» form employer, «Your Grace will be through the lawyer's letters to the progressively formed

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anachronistic narrator who acts as commentator, a sort of narrator-historian, on the cultural, religious, and socio-historical background of early eighteenth-century England. Ann Lee, one finally learns at the end of the novel, is the historical name of the heroine's fictional baby; the narrative concluding then with the birth of the founder of «the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, better known as the Shakers» (M, 455). But *A Maggot* is not directly about the historical Ann Lee but rather about her fictional mother, Louise-Fanny-Rebecca, the prostitute who will redeem herself and become the narrative's existential heroine.

Going back now to page 58, what the reader is offered next is not a more or less conventional narration of the travellers' enigmatic expedition towards its conclusion but the unexpected presentation of an intertext, namely a facsimile page of the «Historicle Chronicle» for April 1736 from *The Gentleman's Magazine*, an eighteenth-century English periodical. The caesura occasioned by the insertion of this first intertext in the development of the action is definitely transformed in a halt<sup>3</sup>. No presentation of the events of May Day 1736 will ever be rendered by the modern narrator since most of the remainder of the narrative will be of a very different type. An unusual multiplicity and heterogeneity of texts and a vast range of heteroglossic voices, which create a Bakhtinian, dialogic structure, will from then on be presented<sup>4</sup>; the narrative being therewith taken over by a new character, Henry Ayscough, the lawyer-interrogator appointed by the duke, Bartholomew's father, whose task is to investigate the events that led to the disappearance of «His Lordship», the death of his servant, and simultaneously discover the whereabouts of the other travellers: Mr Brown (Lacy), Sergeant Farthing (Jones) and Louise-Fanny (Rebecca). *A Maggot* proceeds therefore with Ayscough's investigations, particularly in the manner of «Examinations and Depositions», that is the sworn testimony of witnesses in the «Q» and «A» form, and personal letters from the lawyer addressed to his employer, «Your Grace», the duke, informing him about his findings. Hence, it will be through the witnesses' depositions and the analysis of these in the lawyer's letters to the duke that the reader's understanding of the action is progressively formed.

Like Fowles' previous fictional works, *A Maggot* is a narrative based on existentialist premises. «I've made the girl heroine a prostitute in the beginning», Fowles declared in an interview, «and a kind of saint (in the Protestant sense) at the end, and that links with my interest in existentialism – the belief that people can sometimes change their lives in extraordinary, very profound ways» (Barnum, 1988: 142). Whereas in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Sarah plays the key role in the hero's evolution<sup>5</sup>, in this narrative it is Bartholomew who leads Rebecca, the heroine, to self-awareness, self-discovery, and transformation. He is a member of the ruling elite, the younger son of a duke, who feels thoroughly

trapped in a rigid society that denies him freedom. Having decided to cut himself loose, he infringes the rules of patriarchal authority and initiates his personal quest for freedom. Rebecca's aristocratic mentor is a Magus-figure; one who leads the Fowlesian godgame. It is with the journey and all the conflicting stories which Bartholomew creates that his godgame begins. Like Conchis in *The Magus* (1966), Bartholomew may be perceived as a «surrogate author who does within the world of the novel... what a postmodernist writer such as Fowles does with words: he creates various fictional scenarios to be acted out and in the process proliferates artifice and uncertainty about what is real... but whose ultimate intention seems to be the benign one of bestowing freedom» (Holmes, 1991: 238).

In *A Maggot*, Rebecca appears as the elected. She is the chosen one and after various tests she is informed by his Lordship: «You are she I have sought» (*M*, 328). When Bartholomew discovered her in a London brothel as Fanny or «The Quaker Maid», she knew she was «on the path to hell and with no excuse save [her] own obstinacy in sin, that is none». She also sinned «the more brazenly because at heart [she] would sin no more» (*M*, 309). But, because «There was that in me that matched what he willed... That I had sinned, and should sin no more» (*M*, 329-30), Bartholomew felt that she had the potential to become one of the «elect», that she was in a state of readiness. Rebecca was existentially ready to make changes: «It had become strong upon me that I must change my life, now saw I his Lordship was my prison's key» (*M*, 309). Being involved in the godgame, she must learn by it. She must go through a heuristic ordeal in order to liberate herself. Such ordeal happens most particularly in the cave episode but also at different points during the journey where, for instance, she is confronted with his Lordship's odd behaviour towards her. Whilst at times he acts kindly, at others he seems to act in an extremely cruel way. He is cruel, for instance, in his debasement of Rebecca as a harlot when, refusing her advances, he has her sexually perform with his servant in front of him. He definitely humiliates her when kneeled in front of him she is made to denounce herself: «I am a public whore... hired for your use... to please you in all... I am issued of Eve... with all her sins... and guilty of insolence... which henceforward I do renounce... and so I swear... or may I be damned in hell» (*M*, 48-9).

After the travellers' night at the Black Hart Inn, early next morning, May Day, following Lacy and Jones' departure Bartholomew, his servant, and the young woman go on to a cave in Cleeve Wood. What ensues is the climax of the godgame: the death and rebirth of Rebecca, the questing heroine, and the disappearance of Bartholomew, the Magus-figure. As in all godgames, the gods abscond and the hero / heroine is left alone to make out, on his/her own, the experience he/she went through. From the mythic encounter in the cave, Rebecca «came out new-born from [Holy Mother Wisdom's] spirit's womb» (*M*, 385).

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She is «Christ's reborn» (*M*, 427) and she emerges «naked, a new kind of being – an Ur-Shaker – and thoroughly individuated. She transcends the limits of the earthbound larva and becomes a winged creature that soars ... Rebecca evolves, as does the winged creature toward freedom» (Tarbox, 1988: 153-4). She is changed, metamorphosed, as suggested by the novel's title, through personal growth.

It is towards the middle of the narrative, halfway through Ayscough's investigation (*M*, 289), at the beginning of October 1736, i.e., five months after the May-Day events in the cave, that Rebecca is finally found and brought to testify before the investigator; a different woman, strong in her new religious beliefs, pregnant, and married to a blacksmith, John Lee, a previous Quaker now become a French Prophet, or Shaker.

Like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and its multiple endings, *A Maggot* presents two contradictory versions of the happenings that took place in the cave. To Jones, Rebecca reports to have observed witchcraft, to have been raped by the Devil himself, witnessed a black wedding between his Lordship and a young witch, and then as in a daydream to have been brought before visions of Hell. In her deposition to Ayscough, it is a religious experience, a vision of «June Eternal», a heavenly place, or in Rebecca's words «Heaven itself» (*M*, 375), that she is offered and hence is transformed. In her belief his Lordship is a Christ figure who, she informs the lawyer, accompanies the woman in silver who is like three women merged into one: a holy matriarchal trinity named «Holy Mother Wisdom». According to her, Bartholomew returns to June Eternal leaving behind his servant, who in desperation hangs himself.

Rebecca's fantastic vision of June Eternal – a sequence of moving pictures – is made possible through the «gliding window» of a large machine described in these terms:

The maggot ... that floated in the inner cavern, like a great swollen maggot, white as snow upon the air ... Yes, like a maggot, tho' not ... Of white, yet not of flesh, as it were wood japanned, or fresh-tinned metal, large as three coaches end to end, or more, its head with the eye larger still; and I did see other eyes along its side that shone also, tho' less, through a greenish glass ... it hung in the air like a kite, yet no string. Or a windhover, yet beat no wings, as they do (*M*, 359-60).

The maggot's description immediately forms in one's mind an unequivocal association with fantasy and science fiction, with spaceships and extraterrestrial beings. The inclusion of SF motifs in *A Maggot* is unprecedented in Fowles' fictional work and can be recognised as a sign of further experimentation in his writing. As one critic notes, «The maggot experience, then, is a metaphor of unassigned meaning. The modern reader will generally see in it spaceships and

beings from other planets, for such is the alphabet of contemporary life» (Tarbox, 1988: 152). Another asks: «Did Mr Bartholomew leave the planet aboard a spaceship? Was he killed by Rebecca ...? Were the «women in silver» local witches or visitors from outer space? Was Dick a moron, Mr Bartholomew's mentor, a nonhuman creature, a resurrected medieval knight?» (Balsamo, 1991: 148).

Because no direct presentation of the cave episode is ever offered, in *A Maggot* one is left with the sole testimony of Rebecca, the single eyewitness. Moreover, Rebecca having previously told Jones quite another tale, a demonic version of the cave events, and having also admitted that she was asleep at the time of his Lordship's disappearance, the deposition she gives must consequently appear as unreliable. What is the reader then to make of all this? «Bartholomew constructs a proliferating godgame. He leaves Rebecca behind to tell the story, which then becomes a godgame for Ayscough, the duke and the reader. The meaning of the masque», as is interestingly posed, «is equally unassigned for all who hear the story. Therefore, Bartholomew offers the opportunity for all to undergo personal growth» (Tarbox, 1988: 154). Here, it will once more be the reader's task to provide his/her own answer. Since Fowles' narrative features so many conflicting stories, points of view, judgements, open questions - a good example of Barthes' writerly text, i.e., the polyphonic or the plural, «open» text - the reader can no longer be a consumer of meaning. He/she has to have an active role and become a producer of meanings.

In *A Maggot*, and more particularly in its «Q» and «A» sections, Fowles is seen to manipulate the discourses and registers of a previous literary period. While still working on the novel, he spoke to an interviewer about the language, the pastiche he was employing.

In fact, I find working on the new novel very enjoyable. In this case I'm especially determined to get the language right. And I've found it's not enough to write just an exact imitation of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century language. I've had to find some slightly mythical language which sounds more or less 18<sup>th</sup> century and which won't offend the modern reader (Foulke, 1986: 376).

The eighteenth-century language created by the author is generally marked by terms such as «thee», «thou», «thyself», «thine», amongst others. Protestant dissent and its religious lexis, such as «brother» and «sister», or expressions such as «praise Jesus», «more love, sister» or «praise the Lord», distinguish Rebecca's discourse and put it in direct contrast with Ayscough's legal discourse. In what concerns the investigator's discourse, Fowles' heroine shows difficulties in understanding what he says, needing time to answer «as if she must have Ayscough's words first translated from a foreign language before she can frame a

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reply» (*M*, 413). Unexpectedly coming forward as a changed woman, a dangerous dissenter, a Shaker prophetess who demands change, she is met with Ayscough's disbelief. He refuses to believe in her personal change, that she has suffered a religious conversion, that she is Christ's reborn, and is decided to humiliate her: «I believe thee a cunning whore still» (*M*, 371).

Rebecca is also particularly subject to class discrimination. While Ayscough is identified as the representative of the rich and of conservatism she, on the contrary, represents the poor and change. Moreover, being a female she is both subject to the lawyer's sexism and to the rigid patriarchal society such as that of the early eighteenth-century England in which she lives. In her deposition, Rebecca refers to women's subjection in her society in these revealing terms:

A: ... As I was used when whore, so I may be used still. And all women beside.

Q: How, all women are whores?

A: Whores in this. We may not say what we believe, nor say what we think, for fear we might be mocked because we are women. If men think a thing be so, so must it be, we must obey. I speak not of thee alone, it is so with all men, and everywhere (*M*, 421).

Because she is a woman she represents temptation and is to blame for male lust and for man's carnal faults. Yet she strongly rejects this when she contends: «Thee'd make me mirror of thy sex» (*M*, 360), «I say again, thee'd have me mirror of my sex, that thine has made. I will not suit... Can thee not see that I am changed, I am harlot no more, I am Christ's reborn, I have seen June Eternal? I will not suit» (*M*, 426-7).

The antagonism between Ayscough, the male middle-class lawyer, and Rebecca, the female working-class dissenter, is at one point explicitly demonstrated in the modern narrator's words:

In truth these two were set apart from each other not only by countless barriers of age, sex, class, education, native province and the rest, but by something far deeper still: by belonging to two very different halves of the human spirit, perhaps at root those, left and right, of the two hemispheres of the brain (*M*, 430).

Ironically, the narrator further comments that those, such as Ayscough, who are left-lobe (right-handed) people are «rational, mathematical, ordered, glib with words, usually careful and conventional; human society largely runs ... because of them». Conversely those, such as Rebecca and other dissenters, who are right-lobe (left-handed) people must be considered «poor at reason, often confused in argument; their sense of time (and politic timing) is often defective ... They

confuse, they upset, they disturb». While Ayscough is clearly posited as a representative of eighteenth-century rationalism, an authoritarian, conservative and empirical man, Rebecca, on the other hand, is presented as a truly imaginative, democratic, visionary and intuitive woman. The heroine's new faith makes her strive for a new and better world, «the founding of a more humane society ... all that is conveyed in *more love*» (M, 458-9), a society in which equality between the different social classes, between man and woman, would be achieved.

I tell thee a new world comes, no sin shall be, no strife more between man and man, between man and woman, nor parent and child, nor master and servant. No, nor wicked will, nor washing of hands, nor shrugging of shoulders, nor blindness like thine to all that breaks thy comfort and thy selfish ways. No judge shall judge the poor, who would steal himself, were he them; no, nor greed shall rule, likewise not vanity, nor cruel sneers, nor feasting while others starve, nor happy shoes and shirts while any go naked (M, 431).

Whereas Ayscough beholds this as «the rule of the common mob», for Rebecca «it is Christian justice» (M, 375). Fowles has commented that «You would talk in religious terms in the 1700's and 1600's but you were really talking politics» (Holmes, 1991: 233). In those days religious dissension was undoubtedly a major means of social protest.

Also Rebecca's Shaker belief in the duality of God – «Christ is my master and mistress now» (M, 301) – in the Father and Holy Mother Wisdom manifested on this earth first through Jesus Christ, the Son, and later through Ann Lee, the Daughter, is deemed pure blasphemy by the lawyer. When Ayscough declares that «it is sin to rebel against the authority of man», she bravely replies that «Tis reported so, by men» (M, 428) since the Bible has exclusively been written by men. When asked, «The Holy Bible is false witness?», she offers the succeeding considerations:

Witness from one side alone. Which fault lies in man, not in God or His son. Eve came of Adam's rib, so 'tis said in the second of Genesis. In the first 'tis said God created man and woman in His own image, male and female created He them. Which Our Lord Jesus Christ did further speak of it in the Gospel of St. Matthew ... and there nothing of ribs, but of Moses, who did allow men to put away their wives. And Jesus Christ said, from the beginning it was not so. Equal were they made (M, 428).

Rebecca finally tells the lawyer that «Most in this world is unjust by act of man, not of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Change that is my purpose» (M, 429). It is because she is fighting to liberate herself against Christian and societal patriarchy, totally refusing «to believe what those in power would have us believe» (M, 459), that she is to be regarded an existential heroine.

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<sup>1</sup> This first quotation is from the first edition (hereafter referred to as text).

<sup>2</sup> The seven sections of section 2 (pp.13-20), section 3 (pp.41-45), and section 7 (pp.101-105).

<sup>3</sup> The intertexts selected in this study refer to historical information from the *Chronicle*, April 1736 (pp.90-1); *History*, June 1736 (pp.120-1); *History*, October 1736 (pp.408-9).

<sup>4</sup> *A Maggot* comprises a fictional eighteenth-century heteroglossic voices, such as the characters.

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To conclude, in *A Maggot* Rebecca's voice appears in a permanent clash, a constant opposition to Ayscough's. Being aware that her visionary discourse about the eerie happenings in the cave does not conform to reality and so cannot fit the lawyer's rational empiricism, she warns him that they have opposed «alphabets». Fowles' presentation of such a «clash of languages» is made explicit on several occasions. For instance, when asked whether «His Lordship grows the Lord of All, the Redeemer?», her reply to the lawyer is that «Twill not fit thy alphabet, so be it» (M, 383). When further pressured, she retorts: «Thee has thy alphabet, and I mine, that is all. And I must speak mine» (M, 317).

Thus, instead of allowing Ayscough, the lawyer-investigator, and the reader likewise the outcome of a rational, logical explanation to the uncanny disappearance of Bartholomew and the untimely death of his servant, as a heuristic writer Fowles rather incites his reader to produce his/her own solution to his mystery and prefers to provide a final scene, a *tableau* of mother and child, in which he focuses on Rebecca nursing her new-born baby Ann, to whom she sings in tongues, «a rich metaphorical language» (M, 456) used by the Shakers in their prayers.

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<sup>1</sup> This first quotation from *A Maggot* is from page 5 and all subsequent quotations are from this first edition (hereafter referred to as *M*); page references appearing in parentheses within the text.

<sup>2</sup> The seven sections which form *A Maggot's* initial narrative passage are: section 1 (pp.7-13), section 2 (pp.13-20), section 3 (pp.20-28), section 4 (pp.28-34), section 5 (pp.34-41), section 6 (pp.41-45), and section 7 (pp.45-58).

<sup>3</sup> The intertexts selected from *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. VI, include a section devoted to historical information – the *Historical Chronicle* – and are presented as follows: *Historical Chronicle*, April 1736 (pp.59-60); *Historical Chronicle*, May 1736 (pp.77-8); *Historical Chronicle*, June 1736 (pp.90-1); *Historical Chronicle*, July 1736 (pp.110-1); *Historical Chronicle*, August 1736 (pp.120-1); *Historical Chronicle*, September 1736 (pp.196-7); and *Historical Chronicle*, October 1736 (pp.408-9). The reader is also offered «Pretty Miss's Catechism» (pp.320-2), a «literary memory» which acts as a satire, selected from *The Gentleman's Magazine* for August.

<sup>4</sup> *A Maggot* comprises a prologue, eleven narrative passages, eight testimonies, eleven letters, a fictional eighteenth-century newspaper report, eight intertexts, an epilogue, and a vast range of heteroglossic voices, such as Fowles', the twentieth-century narrator's, and the voices of twelve characters.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of Fowles' most prominent heroine see my forthcoming article, Narrative Technique in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: John Fowles' Presentation of Sarah and Charles.