In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, the feminism of Adele Ratignolle is often overshadowed by the radical feminism of the heroine, Edna Pontellier. Edna chooses suicide rather than a life confined by societal expectations, and her shocking resolution provokes passionate reactions in readers, as extreme acts will do. But to focus solely on Edna's radical feminism is to limit Chopin's exploration of feminism itself. Today, more than ever, feminism is about choice, and Chopin, through Adele, offers her readers more than one definition of feminist expression. Granted, Adele's subtle rebellion to patriarchal ideology is easy to overlook as she forges her resistance from behind and within masculine parameters, manipulating the male-defined borders of her identity as wife and mother, at once being and contesting the patriarchal ideals. Adele's interior subversion is far less dramatic than Edna's total rejection, yet, as the saying goes, Adele "lives to tell the tale," and thus, through Adele's character, Chopin offers an affirmation of feminist possibility.

Introduced as a "mother-woman," Adele's position as a feminist is difficult for some readers to discern, and this difficulty betrays the double-bind women often find themselves in: to become a wife and mother is, on some level, to capitulate one's self to patriarchal systems, but this should not render a woman's feminism suspect — and yet it so often does. Chopin highlights this feminist tension through her heroine: Edna cannot perceive Adele as a self outside of her societal roles, ironically placing Adele behind the same role limitations Edna herself is attempting to escape.
Adele is described as what Edna is not: a "mother-woman." Right from the start, though, Chopin toys with feminine stereotypes as the narrator proceeds to celebrate Adele as a "bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams," the "embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture" (51). The tone is almost silly in its over-the-top admiration, undercuts any serious valorization of Adele. As Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith have noted with regards to the narrative stance in Chopin's text, when the narrator interrupts with "grand assertions... it becomes unreliable," and suggests an ironic stance exists behind the narrator's admiration (149). In the above passage, the melodramatic language is gently sarcastic, signaling that a healthy skepticism should accompany the reader's acceptance of Adele's mythical status. This skeptical reading is further enhanced and supported by the narrator's description of the "mother-women" of Grand Isle over whom Adele presides:

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood... women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (51)

This exaggerated description at once captures, and mocks, the idealized patriarchal role of mother-as-saint. Interestingly, Chopin was ahead of her time; contemporary feminist Judith Butler argues that when we expose "the performative status of the natural," we expose the "unnaturalness" of assigned gender roles [Butler as quoted in DiQuinzio, 17]. Chopin reveals how women are being defined by a male construct of motherhood that not only denies their individual identity, but also continually reinforces a sense of inferiority, for what woman can measure up to the standard of an "angel?" Obviously, through Edna's growing unrest and eventual rejection of the roles society has assigned to her, the burden of these expectations is shown to be a real dilemma on a woman's psyche. Chopin also, however, uses Adele's char-
acter to show readers another form of resistance: Adele reveals her strength and feminist identity by working the patriarchal system to her advantage.

Adele is a great performer, overdoing her mother role while at the same time allowing glimpses of her true self to emerge from that role, and that self is confident, powerful, and sexual. For example, a pregnant Adele is with Edna and Robert (the acknowledged boy-toy for the island’s matrons), and Adele suddenly feels faint. After Robert and Edna quickly attend to her, Edna wonders “if there were not a little imagination responsible for its origin, for the rose tint had never faded from her friend’s face;” the “selfless” expectant mother role has provided Adele with a little selfish attention (56). Later at the beach, Adele, in motherly fashion, feels protective of Edna’s vulnerability to Robert and wants to warn him to stay away from Edna, so she pretends to be overcome with weakness and in need of an escort home. Robert accompanies her, and Adele is then able to caution him away from Edna. As they continue home, Adele waits out his anger (now mothering Robert as if he were a spoiled child), and then, once back home, she allows him to wait on her. She takes the bouillon he offers her, thrusting “a bare, white arm from the curtain which shielded her open door” (66). Admittedly, these moments have the taint of feminine wiles about them, yet because we know Adele, in the past, has freely engaged in flirtatious and racy dialogue with young Robert, her actions also suggest a hint of a femme fatale; i.e., the white arm, the blushed face, the commanding presence.

While Charles Harmon argues that “Adele ensures that traditional gender roles are both reinforced and parodied — indeed, enforced precisely through parody” (11), Adele’s behavior is a little more complicated. By allowing Adele’s character to introduce and blend confident sexuality in the mother role, Chopin is distorting the role’s defined limits. In other words, Adele’s character projects the ideal mother-woman image, magnifies its stereotypical qualities, and then, by allowing Adele — a pregnant woman — to hint at a sexual
identity, Chopin contests the boundaries of Adele’s assigned gender roles: is she a mother? a femme fatale? a saint? a wild woman? Chopin suggests Adele is all of them, and, in doing so, she reveals an identity that confuses, and thus belies, static stereotypes, and, importantly, she reveals Adele’s ownership and authority of the mother-woman role beyond the male-prescribed definitions. It is a quiet revolution of sorts.

Traditionally, the institution of motherhood demands the suppression of a woman’s sexuality; that Adele continues to exude her sexuality in her pregnant state is quite startling, almost radical. Carolyn Mathews notes that while Adele is “most often read as the embodiment of traditional womanhood . . . [her] maternal qualities are often overshadowed by an erotic appeal” (12). Indeed, for each image of Adele as “Madonna,” Chopin confuses its message with a “delicious” image. For example, Edna visits Adele at her home in the city and catches her in the task of sorting laundry, a domestic image that, however, slides away for the reader as Edna proceeds to describe Adele as looking “more beautiful than ever . . . in a negligee which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the right, melting curves of her white throat” (105-6). It is interesting to note that while Edna’s description of Adele suggests she is attracted to Adele’s sensual beauty, the narrator points out that Edna looks at Adele “as she might look upon a faultless Madonna” (54). Significantly, even as Edna describes a flesh and blood woman, she perceives a traditional, male-defined and idealized mother image. If we look closely at Edna’s perception of Adele, we can see how Chopin uses Edna’s character to expose how deeply imbedded the traditional gender role of selfless mother exists in our society: Edna (and, ironically, many critics) immediately and wrongly perceives Adele as passive, self-sacrificing, and passionless because she is labeled “mother-woman.” Once so categorized, Adele’s identity in Edna’s world, and as a character for interpretation, is diminished. Yet, in order to claim true feminist intentions, we need to interpret Adele’s character more fully. On an obvious level, Adele’s actions rein-
force the gender roles assigned to her, but look beyond the easy characterization to the woman Chopin hints at: Adele possesses an assertive, bold identity that can barely suppress a knowing wink to the conventional demands of her society.

Adele’s irrepressible character refuses to be silenced, and this makes her a powerful feminist role model. Yet, again, because Adele’s character rebels against the institution of motherhood from within that institution, her effectiveness is unfairly denigrated. Her position is the unpopular middle ground of resistance, far less romantic than the dramatics of extremists, such as Edna, but it is where change is most affected, and Chopin points to this possibility. For example, Edna views almost with disdain the domestic harmony that exists between Adele and her husband, pitying Adele’s “colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment . . . [Adele] would never have the taste of life’s delirium,” yet Edna’s perceptions are strangely limited (she herself wonders what she means by “life’s delirium”) and almost childishly subjective, as if there is no world outside of her own vision. Further, Edna observes that Adele listens intently to everything her husband says, yet Edna discerns nothing spirited in the fact that Adele also freely “takes the words out of his mouth” (107). Indeed, Adele’s ability to finish her husband’s sentences suggests domestic compatibility and familiarity, but this exchange also signifies that in the home sphere, Adele is an equal, perhaps even dominant, partner in the marriage. Symbolically, this exchange becomes even more interesting when we compare it to Edna’s relationship with her husband, Leonce. Edna, for the most part, uses silence to communicate with Leonce. Referring to radical feminist theory, we can speculate that, because all language is masculine, Edna has no language by which to express an authentic feminine expression and thus she remains silent, and this interpretation fits nicely with Edna’s eventual radical rejection of all patriarchal constructs. Following this line of reasoning, then, Adele actions of “taking the words out of [her husband’s] mouth,” can be positively
interpreted as Adele’s ability to usurp and claim patriarchal language as her own. Since the majority of readers’ lives will, on a fundamental level, more closely resemble Adele’s domestic situation, not Edna’s path of rejection, it becomes important to recognize and validate Adele’s choice of lifestyle and feminist resistance. Adele’s strong, feminist voice at home is realistic, reassuring, and reaffirming.

Not only does Adele refuse to be silenced, she is willing to challenge conventions in feminist support of Edna’s choices. For example, Edna is living alone and associating with Alcee Arobin, a man whose “attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman’s reputation” (163). Adele’s husband has sent Adele to warn Edna that she is at risk of such ruin. Adele gives Edna this warning, and advises her to invite a woman to live with her in order to subdue speculation. However, as quickly as Adele offers this advice to Edna, she takes it back: “don’t mind what I said about Arobin, or having some one to stay with you” (153). Obviously, Adele decides to disregard her husband’s orders, and, to a larger extent, she has decided to disregard societal conventions (the “laws of the fathers”) in support of Edna. This suggests Adele’s respect for Edna’s choices, and it suggests a feminist solidarity that Edna has denied Adele.

Edna’s inability to completely bond with Adele (or other women in the text) suggests that the loss of her mother at an early age has left her with a psychological void. (In fact, Steven Ryan makes a compelling argument that the death of Edna’s mother is the “quiet core in the story” [Ryan, 11].) This damaged aspect of Edna’s psyche is important in our analysis of the novel’s conclusion. While not valorizing the mother role, Chopin nonetheless suggests the power of a mother figure by hinting that Edna’s difficulties arise from the absence of her mother. For example, the narrator associates Edna with the heroines of fairy tales, at one point suggesting she is a “sleeping beauty” on Madame Antoine’s “snow white” bed (83). This literary allusion suggests that, because of the early death of her mother, Edna’s perceptions
of female roles are at the mercy of "masculine storylines." We can assume that Edna's framework for motherhood has been dictated by her harsh father, and is thus a stifling, oppressive masculine ideal left undiluted by a mother's influence and concrete example. As such, it is not surprising that when Edna tries to sketch Adele's portrait, she is "greatly disappointed to find that it did not look like her" (55). Symbolically, Edna is unable to "capture" the saintly mother-woman Adele represents to her (the patriarchal ideal), because such a woman does not exist; she doesn't exist in Adele, and, importantly, this non-existent, idealized woman cannot be realized by Edna (which helps to explain, in part, Edna's endless cycle of desire and dissatisfaction). Unfortunately, Edna is blind to this ideological trap and thus she remains blind to Adele's authentic feminist potential, essentially rejecting Adele as a worthy role model. As Katherine Kearns notes, Edna has "accepted a masculinist definition of selfhood" that allows her to treat Adele with condescension and retreat into an ironic state of anti-feminism (73). Edna is not alone in dismissing Adele; many critics, too, quickly dismiss Adele as simply a foil to Edna's feminist yearnings.

Critics often equate Adele with passive femininity and domesticity, an interpretation that assesses Adele's position as mother, and then quickly proceeds to label, stereotype, and box-up Adele into her prescribed role of domestic angel. For example, Marion Muirhead views Adele as half of a "binary of female subject positions" that Edna ultimately rejects, Adele representing "passive femininity" to Mademoiselle Reisz's creativity and existence "outside the naturalized dominant ideology" (8); Kathleen Lant deems that "Adele is without a self" because she has become a mother-woman (120). Let's look at these interpretations more closely. The common suggestion that Reisz offers Edna a feminist escape from patriarchal roles turns in on itself if we consider that Reisz almost completely denies her femininity and adopts stereotypical traits most commonly associated with masculinity; e.g., she has no patience for crying babies, is described as having
a self-assertive temper, and a "disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (70). Moreover, Reisz is described as possessing a body marked by "ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity," suggesting that denying one's femininity is surrendering to a belief in masculine superiority, obviously a self-destructive proposition if one is a woman (116). As such, Reisz is barely presented as a worthy alternative to Adele (Edna herself wonders how "she could have listened to [Reisz's] venom so long" [98]). Further, that Adele is viewed as lacking selfhood because she has chosen to be a mother is exactly the easy stereotyping that Chopin's subtext is rebelling against, not to mention it is an interpretive stance that sabotages an inclusive definition of feminism. Chopin never dismisses Adele's character; neither should her readers.

Chopin begins and ends the text with dramatic renderings of Adele, the "mother-woman," and the parallel images of Adele contrast sharply as they move from a sense of idealization, to earthy reality. By providing this changing vision of Adele's character, Chopin prompts her readers to move beyond Adele-as-stereotype, to Adele-as-woman. For example, in the text's opening pages, a traditional image of Adele is presented: she walks the island in her white dress "with the grace and majesty" of a queen, holding her baby while her two other children hold onto her skirt (56). This is a perfect image of motherhood serenity, suggesting a saintly, capable mother floating within the angelic institution of motherhood. Near the end of the text, however, Adele is presented in a way that completely offsets the original, idyllic picture of motherhood and instead, Chopin presents us with an instance of the flesh and blood reality motherhood demands. Specifically, Adele is in the throes of labor and she is anything but serene as she impatiently paces her apartment in a billowing white peignoir. She rants against her husband, yells for and at the doctor, wanting to kill one or both for neglecting her (169). Once again, Adele is dressed in white, yet this time the angelic Madonna image cannot hold as Adele's assertive iden-
tity tears through any gentle rendering and emerges as a volatile woman, a force of nature that no flowing white negligee can mask. It is a wonderful image of a woman emotionally overwrought, yet certainly not overwhelmed, as she voices her demands, her desires, and her command of her power as a life-giving force.

Adele, in her “billowing” white gown, can already be likened to the foaming waves of the ocean, a force of nature, and Chopin continues this association. It is no coincidence that Chopin uses the same serpent metaphor to describe Adele in childbirth, and to describe the sea that claims Edna’s life; Chopin is emphasizing Adele’s potential and power as a woman and as a mother. Specifically, in Adele’s powerful moment of childbirth, her braided hair rests on her pillow, “coiled like a golden serpent” (169); significantly, when Edna is entering the sea for her final swim, the waves “coiled like serpents about her ankles” (176). These images beg to be united and reflected upon. Connotations of the serpent image abound: e.g., Medusa, the mythical goddess with life-giving, as well as death-wielding powers; the temptation of Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge whereby she would forever suffer pain in giving life; a woman in defiance of God/gods and, by extension, in defiance of the laws of patriarchy. What comes to the forefront in all of these connotations is the suggestion of a feminine power to be reckoned with, a dangerous as well as creative force of life. Chopin metaphorically unites Adele’s natural power of childbirth with the natural power of the mighty sea. Importantly, then, when Edna observes Adele in labor and feels a “revolt against the ways of Nature,” Chopin, by extension, suggests Edna’s inability to claim any feminine power under patriarchy, even her biological power as a woman (170). Thus, Edna ultimately rejects, not only the male-defined institution of motherhood, but, most frightening, her life as a woman.

Adele’s last words to Edna are a plea for her to “think of the children” (170). Adele is urging Edna to consider what she holds in her hands — the power of motherhood whereby
Edna could forge her own interior resistance and raise her children less confined by the masculine dictates that now suffocate her existence. Edna, however, can only feel her inability to conform to the constraints of her society, and thus Adele’s final words, in the end, provoke Edna’s suicide.

Returning to the sea, the serpent image of feminine power now becomes ominous as it resides over Edna’s birth into death. Significantly, unlike Adele, Edna does not embody the metaphor of feminine power — the maternal sea does. As such, the import of Adele’s last words, to think of the children, take root and gain issue in Edna’s suicide, for where does Edna return? Symbolically, she returns to the womb and the lost mother, suggesting that if she had experienced a mother in life, she would not now have to seek her in death. Tragically, Edna now leaves her children to confront the same psychological burden that has marred her existence: she leaves them motherless and destined to forever seek the lost “mother” in their patriarchal world. Chopin, by insinuating the psychological damage produced by a motherless existence, confirms Adele’s (and all mothers’) power and authority.

No matter how much Edna’s absolute rejection of her conventional gender roles resonates with a sense of feminist triumph, it is a type of literary romanticism that can quickly dead-end in despair once the book cover is closed; Edna’s escape through death may feel freeing, but ultimately, she offers us no hope. For this reason alone, we need to recognize that Chopin is offering more than one definition of feminist expression. She appeals to both the radical and realist feminist blended in every woman, and we need both. With Edna, Chopin gives us an exhilarating, nihilistic escape from the patriarchal reality of our world. With Adele, Chopin gives us a vision of feminism that not only addresses patriarchal reality, but addresses women’s existence in that reality, allowing for an accessible and life-affirming form of feminism. In other words, Chopin gives us the fantasy of swimming away from it all, but she doesn’t leave us high and dry once we are back
on the shore of reality — she leaves us with Medusa/Adele/mother at home.

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